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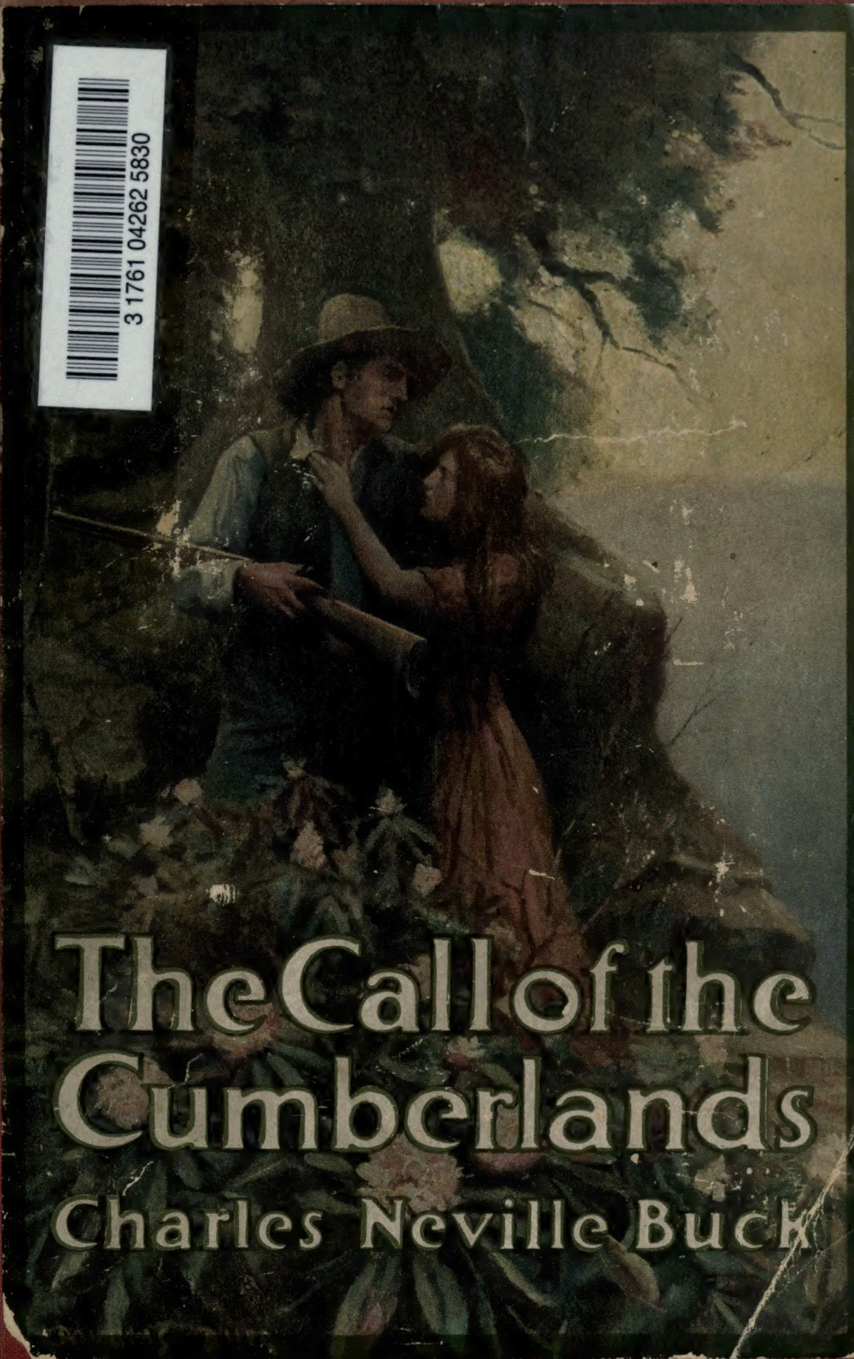
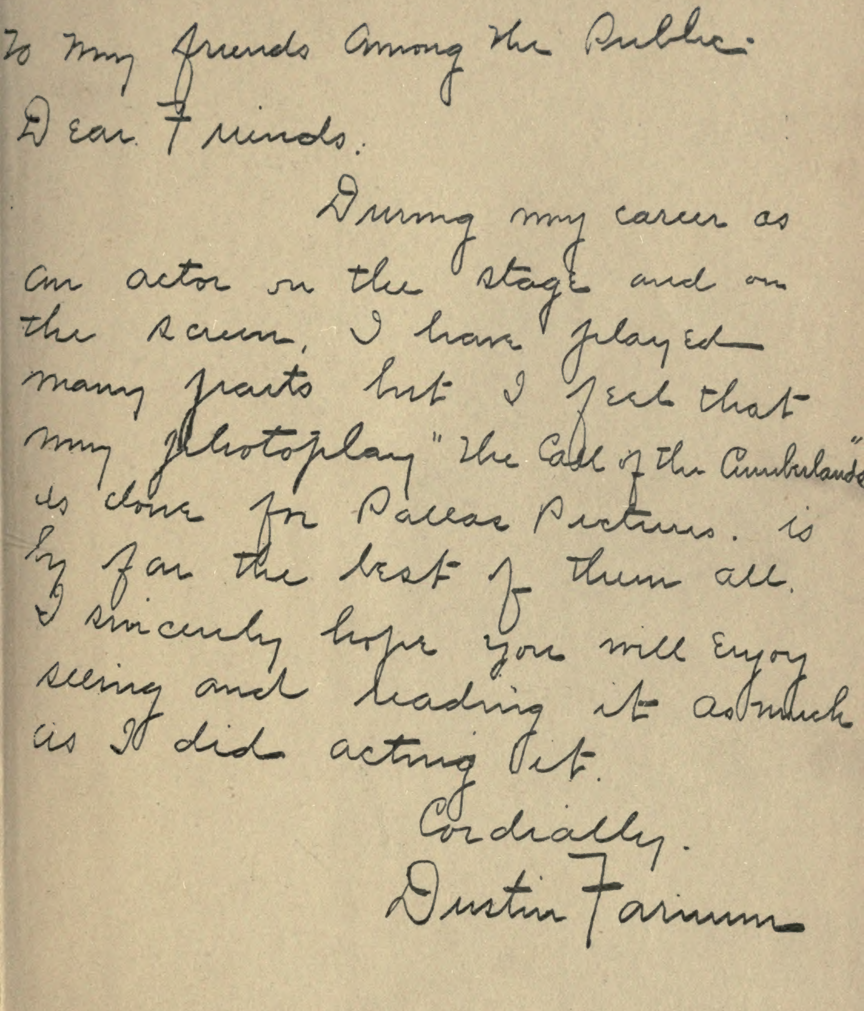


The Call of the Cumberlands

Charles Neville Buck



To my friends Among the Public:

Dear Friends:

During my career as an actor on the stage and on the screen, I have played many parts but I feel that my photoplay "The Call of the Cumberlands" as done for Pallas Pictures. is by far the best of them all. I sincerely hope you will enjoy seeing and reading it as much as I did acting it.

Cordially.

Dustin Farnum

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THE
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Cordially
Dustin Farnum

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THE CALL OF THE CUMBERLANDS

BY

CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

AUTHOR OF
THE PORTAL OF DREAMS, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES FROM THE PHOTOPLAY PRODUCED AND COPYRIGHTED
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Other novels by

Charles Neville Buck

THE KEY TO YESTERDAY
THE LIGHTED MATCH
THE PORTAL OF DREAMS

The Call of the Cumberlands

CHAPTER I

CLOSE to the serried backbone of the Cumberland ridge through a sky of mountain clarity, the sun seemed hesitating before its descent to the horizon. The sugar-loaf cone that towered above a creek called Misery was pointed and edged with emerald tracery where the loftiest timber thrust up its crest plumes into the sun. On the hillsides it would be light for more than an hour yet, but below, where the waters tossed themselves along in a chorus of tiny cascades, the light was already thickening into a cathedral gloom. Down there the "furriner" would have seen only the rough course of the creek between moss-velveted and shaded bowlders of titanic proportions. The native would have recognized the country road in these tortuous twistings. Now there were no travelers, foreign or native, and no sounds from living throats except at intervals the clear "Bob White" of a nesting partridge, and the silver confidence of the red cardinal flitting among the pines. Occasionally, too, a stray whisper of breeze stole along the creek-bed and rustled the beeches, or stirred in the broad, fanlike leaves of the "cucumber trees." A great block of sandstone, to whose summit a man standing in his saddle could scarcely reach his fingertips, towered above the stream, with a gnarled scrub oak clinging tenaciously to its apex. Loftily on both sides climbed the mountains cloaked in laurel and timber.

Suddenly the leafage was thrust aside from above by a cautious hand, and a shy, half-wild girl appeared in the opening. For an instant she halted, with her brown fingers holding back the brushwood, and raised her face as though listening. Across the slope drifted the call of the partridge, and with perfect imitation she whistled back an answer. It would have seemed appropriate to anyone who had seen her that she should talk bird language to the birds. She was herself as much a wood creature as they, and very young. That she was beautiful was not strange. The women of the mountains have a morning-glory bloom—until hardship and drudgery have taken toll of their youth—and she could not have been more than sixteen.

It was June, and the hills, which would be bleakly forbidding barriers in winter, were now as blithely young as though they had never known the scourging of sleet or the blight of wind. The world was abloom, and the girl, too, was in her early June, and sentiently alive with the strength of its full pulse-tide. She was slim and lithely resilient of step. Her listening attitude was as eloquent of pausing elasticity as that of the gray squirrel. Her breathing was soft, though she had come down a steep mountainside, and as fragrant as the breath of the elder bushes that dashed the banks with white sprays of blossom. She brought with her to the greens and grays and browns of the woodland's heart a new note of color, for her calico dress was like the red cornucopias of the trumpet-flower, and her eyes were blue like little scraps of sky. Her heavy, brown-red hair fell down over her shoulders in loose profusion. The coarse dress was freshly briar-torn, and in many places patched; and it hung to the lithe curves of her body in a fashion which told that she wore little else. She had no hat, but the same spirit of childlike whimsey that caused her eyes to dance as she answered the partridge's call had led her to fashion for her own crowning a headgear of laurel leaves and wild roses. As she stood with the toes of one bare foot twisting in the gratefully cool moss, she laughed with the sheer exhilaration of life and youth, and started out on the table top of the huge rock. But there she halted suddenly with a startled exclamation, and drew instinctively back. What she saw might well have astonished her, for it was a thing she had never seen before and of which she had never heard. Now she paused in indecision between going forward toward exploration and retreating from new and unexplained phenomena. In her quick instinctive movements was something like the irresolution of the fawn whose nostrils have dilated to a sense of possible danger. Finally, reassured by the silence, she slipped across the broad face of the flat rock for a distance of twenty-five feet, and paused again to listen.

At the far edge lay a pair of saddlebags, such as form the only practical equipment for mountain travelers. They were ordinary saddlebags, made from the undressed hide of a brindle cow, and they were fat with tight packing. A pair of saddlebags lying unclaimed at the roadside would in themselves challenge curiosity. But in this instance they gave only the prefatory note to a stranger story. Near them lay a tin box, littered with small and unfamiliar-looking tubes of soft metal, all grotesquely twisted and stained, and beside the box was a strangely shaped plaque of wood, smeared with a dozen hues. That this plaque was a painter's sketching palette was a thing which she could not know, since the ways of artists had to do with a world as remote from her own as the life of the moon or stars. It was one of those vague mysteries that made up the wonderful life of "down below." Even the names of such towns as Louisville and Lexington meant nothing definite to this girl who could barely spell out, "The cat caught the rat," in the primer. Yet here beside the box and palette stood a strange jointed tripod, and upon it was some sort of sheet. What it all meant, and what was on the other side of the sheet became a matter of keenly alluring interest. Why had these things been left here in such confusion? If there was a man about who owned them he would doubtless return to claim them. Possibly he was wandering about the broken bed of the creek, searching for a spring, and that would not take long. No one drank creek water. At any moment he might return and discover her. Such a contingency held untold terrors for her shyness, and yet to turn her back on so interesting a mystery would be insupportable. Accordingly, she crept over, eyes and ears alert, and slipped around to the front of the queer tripod, with all her muscles poised in readiness for flight.

A half-rapturous and utterly astonished cry broke from her lips. She stared a moment, then dropped to the moss-covered rock, leaning back on her brown hands and gazing intently. She sat there forgetful of everything except the sketch which stood on the collapsible easel.

"Hit's purty!" she approved, in a low, musical murmur. "Hit's plumb dead *beautiful!*" Her eyes were glowing with delighted approval.

She had never before seen a picture more worthy than the chromos of advertising calendars and the few crude prints that find their way into the roughest places, and she was a passionate, though totally unconscious, devotée of beauty. Now she was sitting before a sketch, its paint still moist, which more severe critics would have pronounced worthy of accolade. Of course, it was not a finished picture—merely a study of what lay before her—but the hand that had placed these brush-strokes on the academy board was the sure, deft hand of a master of landscape, who had caught the splendid spirit of the thing, and fixed it immutably in true and glowing appreciation. Who he was; where he had gone; why his work stood there unfinished and abandoned, were details which for the moment this half-savage child-woman forgot to question. She was conscious only of a sense of revelation and awe. Then she saw other boards, like the one upon the easel, piled near the paint-box. These were dry, and represented the work of other days; but they were all pictures of her own mountains, and in each of them, as in this one, was something that made her heart leap.

To her own people, these steep hillsides and "coves" and valleys were a matter of course. In their stony soil, they labored by day: and in their shadows slept when work was done. Yet, someone had discovered that they held a picturesque and rugged beauty; that they were not merely steep fields where the plough was useless and the hoe must be used. She must tell Samson: Samson, whom she held in an artless exaltation of hero-worship; Samson, who was so "smart" that he thought about things beyond her understanding; Samson, who could not only read and write, but speculate on problematical matters.

Suddenly she came to her feet with a swift-darting impulse of alarm. Her ear had caught a sound. She cast searching glances about her, but the tangle was empty of humanity. The water still murmured over the rocks undisturbed. There was no sign of human presence, other than herself, that her eyes could discover—and yet to her ears came the sound again, and this time more distinctly. It was the sound of a man's voice, and it was moaning as if in pain. She rose and searched vainly through the bushes of the hillside where the rock ran out from the woods. She lifted her skirts and splashed her bare feet in the shallow creek water, wading persistently up and down. Her shyness was forgotten. The groan was a groan of a human creature in distress, and she must find and succor the person from whom it came.

Certain sounds are baffling as to direction. A voice from overhead or broken by echoing obstacles does not readily betray its source. Finally she stood up and listened once more intently—her attitude full of tense earnestness.

"I'm shore a fool," she announced, half-aloud. "I'm shore a plumb fool." Then she turned and disappeared in the deep cleft between the gigantic bowlder upon which she had been sitting and another—small only by comparison. There, ten feet down, in a narrow alley littered with ragged stones, lay the crumpled body of a man. It lay with the left arm doubled under it, and from a gash in the forehead trickled a thin stream of blood. Also, it was the body of such a man as she had not seen before.

CHAPTER II

ALTHOUGH from the man in the gulch came a low groan mingled with his breathing, it was not such a sound as comes from fully conscious lips, but rather that of a brain dulled into coma. His lids drooped over his eyes, hiding the pupils; and his cheeks were pallid, with outstanding veins above the temples.

Freed from her fettering excess of shyness by his condition, the girl stepped surely from foothold to foothold until she reached his side. She stood for a moment with one hand on the dripping walls of rock, looking down while her hair fell about her face. Then, dropping to her knees, she shifted the doubled body into a leaning posture, straightened the limbs, and began exploring with efficient fingers for broken bones.

She was a slight girl, and not tall; but the curves of her young figure were slimly rounded, and her firm muscles were capably strong. This man was, in comparison with those rugged types she knew, effeminately delicate. His slim, long-fingered hands reminded her of a bird's claws. The up-rolled sleeves of a blue flannel shirt disclosed forearms well-enough sinewed, but instead of being browned to the hue of a saddle-skirt, they were white underneath and pinkly red above. Moreover, they were scaling in the fashion of a skin not inured to weather beating. Though the man had thought on setting out from civilization that he was suiting his appearance to the environment, the impression he made on this native girl was distinctly foreign. The flannel shirt might have passed, though hardly without question, as native wear, but the khaki riding-breeches and tan puttees were utterly out of the picture, and at the neck of his shirt was a soft-blue tie!—had he not been hurt, the girl must have laughed at that.

A felt hat lay in a puddle of water, and, except for a blond mustache, the face was clean shaven and smooth of skin. Long locks of brown hair fell away from the forehead. The helplessness and pallor gave an exaggerated seeming of frailty.

Despite an ingrained contempt for weaklings, the girl felt, as she raised the head and propped the shoulders, an intuitive friendliness for the mysterious stranger.

She had found the left arm limp above the wrist, and her fingers had diagnosed a broken bone. But unconsciousness must have come from the blow on the head, where a bruise was already blackening, and a gash still trickled blood.

She lifted her skirt, and tore a long strip of cotton from her single petticoat. Then she picked her barefooted way swiftly to the creek-bed, where she drenched the cloth for bathing and bandaging the wound. It required several trips through the littered cleft, for the puddles between the rocks were stale and brackish; but these journeys she made with easy and untrammeled swiftness. When she had done what she could by way of first aid, she stood looking down at the man, and shook her head dubiously.

"Now ef I jest had a little licker," she mused. "Thet air what he needs—a little licker!"

A sudden inspiration turned her eyes to the crest of the rock. She did not go round by the path, but pulled herself up the sheer face by hanging roots and slippery projections, as easily as a young squirrel. On the flat surface, she began unstrapping the saddlebags, and, after a few moments of rummaging among their contents, she smiled with satisfaction. Her hand brought out a leather-covered flask with a silver bottom. She held the thing up curiously, and looked at it. For a little time, the screw top puzzled her. So, she sat down cross-legged, and experimented until she had solved its method of opening.

Then, she slid over the side again, and at the bottom held the flask up to the light. Through the side slits in the alligator-skin covering, she saw the deep color of the contents; and, as she lifted the nozzle, she sniffed contemptuously. Then, she took a sample draught herself—to make certain that it was whiskey.

She brushed her lips scornfully with the back of her hand.

"Huh!" she exclaimed. "Hit hain't nothin' but red licker, but maybe hit mout be better'n nuthin'." She was accustomed to seeing whiskey freely drunk, but the whiskey she knew was colorless as water, and sweetish to the palate.

She knew the "mountain dew" which paid no revenue tax, and which, as her people were fond of saying, "mout make a man drunk, but couldn't git him wrong." After tasting the "fotched-on" substitute, she gravely, in accordance with the fixed etiquette of the hills, wiped the mouth of the bottle on the palm of her hand, then, kneeling once more on the stones, she lifted the stranger's head in her supporting arm, and pressed the flask to his lips. After that, she chafed the wrist which was not hurt, and once more administered the tonic. Finally, the man's lids fluttered, and his lips moved. Then, he opened his eyes. He opened them waveringly, and seemed on the point of closing them again, when he became conscious of a curved cheek, suddenly coloring to a deep flush, a few inches from his own. He saw in the same glance a pair of wide blue eyes, a cloud of brown-red hair that fell down and brushed his face, and he felt a slender young arm about his neck and shoulders.

"Hello!" said the stranger, vaguely. "I seem to have——" He broke off, and his lips smiled. It was a friendly, understanding smile, and the girl, fighting hard the shy impulse to drop his shoulders, and flee into the kind masking of the bushes, was in a measure reassured.

"You must hev fell offen the rock," she enlightened.

"I think I might have fallen into worse circumstances," replied the unknown.

"I reckon you kin set up after a little."

"Yes, of course." The man suddenly realized that although he was quite comfortable as he was, he could scarcely expect to remain permanently in the support of her bent arm. He attempted to prop himself on his hurt hand, and relaxed with a twinge of extreme pain. The color, which had begun to creep back into his cheeks, left them again, and his lips compressed themselves tightly to bite off an exclamation of suffering.

"Thet thar left arm air busted," announced the young woman, quietly. "Ye've got ter be heedful."

Had one of her own men hurt himself, and behaved stoically, it would have been mere matter of course; but her eyes mirrored a pleased surprise at the stranger's good-natured nod and his quiet refusal to give expression to pain. It relieved her of the necessity for contempt.

"I'm afraid," apologized the painter, "that I've been a great deal of trouble to you."

Her lips and eyes were sober as she replied.

"I reckon thet's all right."

"And what's worse, I've got to be more trouble. Did you see anything of a brown mule?"

She shook her head.

"He must have wandered off. May I ask to whom I'm indebted for this first aid to the injured?"

"I don't know what ye means."

She had propped him against the rocks, and sat near-by, looking into his face with almost disconcerting steadiness; her solemn-pupiled eyes were unblinking, unsmiling. Unaccustomed to the gravity of the mountaineer in the presence of strangers, he feared that he had offended her. Perhaps his form of speech struck her as affected.

"Why, I mean who are you?" he laughed.

"I hain't nobody much. I jest lives over yon."

"But," insisted the man, "surely you have a name."

She nodded.

"Hit's Sally."

"Then, Miss Sally, I want to thank you."

Once more she nodded, and, for the first time, let her eyes drop, while she sat nursing her knees. Finally, she glanced up, and asked with plucked-up courage:

"Stranger, what mout yore name be?"

"Lescott—George Lescott."

"How'd ye git hurt?"

He shook his head.

"I was painting—up there," he said; "and I guess I got too absorbed in the work. I stepped backward to look at the canvas, and forgot where the edge was. I stepped too far."

"Hit don't hardly pay a man ter walk backward in these hyar mountings," she told him. The painter looked covertly up to see if at last he had discovered a flash of humor. He had the idea that her lips would shape themselves rather fascinatingly in a smile, but her pupils mirrored no mirth. She had spoken in perfect seriousness.

The man rose to his feet, but he tottered and reeled against the wall of ragged stone. The blow on his head had left him faint and dizzy. He sat down again.

"I'm afraid," he ruefully admitted, "that I'm not quite ready for discharge from your hospital."

"You jest set where yer at." The girl rose, and pointed up the mountainside. "I'll light out across the hill, and fotch Samson an' his mule."

"Who and where is Samson?" he inquired. He realized that the bottom of the valley would shortly thicken into darkness, and that the way out, unguided, would become impossible. "It sounds like the name of a strong man."

"I means Samson South," she enlightened, as though further description of one so celebrated would be redundant. "He's over thar 'bout three quarters."

"Three quarters of a mile?"

She nodded. What else could three quarters mean?

"How long will it take you?" he asked.

She deliberated. "Samson's hoein' corn in the furhill field. He'll hev ter cotch his mule. Hit mout tek a half-hour."

Lescott had been riding the tortuous labyrinths that twisted through creek bottoms and over ridges for several days. In places two miles an hour had been his rate of speed, though mounted and following so-called roads. She must climb a mountain through the woods. He thought it "mout" take longer, and his scepticism found utterance.

"You can't do it in a half-hour, can you?"

"I'll jest take my foot in my hand, an' light out." She turned, and with a nod was gone. The man rose, and made his way carefully over to a mossy bank, where he sat down with his back against a century-old tree to wait.

The beauty of this forest interior had first lured him to pause, and then to begin painting. The place had not treated him kindly, as the pain in his wrist reminded him, but the beauty was undeniable. A clump of rhododendron, a little higher up, dashed its pale clusters against a background of evergreen thicket, and a catalpa tree loaned the perfume of its white blossoms with their wild little splashes of crimson and purple and orange to the incense which the elder bushes were contributing.

Climbing fleetly up through steep and tangled slopes, and running as fleetly down; crossing a brawling little stream on a slender trunk of fallen poplar; the girl hastened on her mission. Her lungs drank the clear air in regular tireless draughts. Once only, she stopped and drew back. There was a sinister rustle in the grass, and something glided into her path and lay coiled there, challenging her with an ominous rattle, and with wicked, beady eyes glittering out of a swaying, arrow-shaped head. Her own eyes instinctively hardened, and she glanced quickly about for a heavy piece of loose timber. But that was only for an instant, then she took a circuitous course, and left her enemy in undisputed possession of the path.

"I hain't got no time ter fool with ye now, old rattlesnake," she called back, as she went. "Ef I wasn't in sech a hurry, I'd shore bust yer neck."

At last, she came to a point where a clearing rose on the mountainside above her. The forest blanket was stripped off to make way for a fenced-in and crazily tilting field of young corn. High up and beyond, close to the bald shoulders of sandstone which threw themselves against the sky, was the figure of a man. As the girl halted at the foot of the field, at last panting from her exertions, he was sitting on the rail fence, looking absently down on the outstretched panorama below him. It is doubtful whether his dreaming eyes were as conscious of what he saw as of other things which his imagination saw beyond the haze of the last far rim. Against the fence rested his abandoned hoe, and about him a number of lean hounds scratched and dozed in the sun. Samson South had little need of hounds; but, in another century, his people, turning their backs on Virginia affluence to invite the hardships of pioneer life, had brought with them certain of the cavaliers' instincts. A hundred years in the stagnant back-waters of the world had brought to their descendants a lapse into illiteracy and semi-squalor, but through it all had fought that thin, insistent flame of instinct. Such a survival was the boy's clinging to his hounds. Once, they had symbolized the spirit of the nobility; the gentleman's fondness for his sport with horse and dog and gun. Samson South did not know the origin of his fondness for this remnant of a pack. He did not know that in the long ago his forefathers had fought on red fields with Bruce and the Stuarts. He only knew that through his crudities something indefinable, yet compelling, was at war with his life, filling him with great and shapeless longings. He at once loved and resented these ramparts of stone that hemmed in his hermit race and world.

He was not, strictly speaking, a man. His age was perhaps twenty. He sat loose-jointed and indolent on the top rail of the fence, his hands hanging over his knees: his hoe forgotten. His feet were bare, and his jeans breeches were supported by a single suspender strap. Pushed well to the back of his head was a battered straw hat, of the sort rurally known as the "ten-cent jimmy." Under its broken brim, a long lock of black hair fell across his forehead. So much of his appearance was typical of the Kentucky mountaineer. His face was strongly individual, and belonged to no type. Black brows and lashes gave a distinctiveness to gray eyes so clear as to be luminous. A high and splendidly molded forehead and a squarely blocked chin were free of that degeneracy which marks the wasting of an in-bred people. The nose was straight, and the mouth firm yet mobile. It was the face of the instinctive philosopher, tanned to a hickory brown. In a stature of medium size, there was still a hint of power and catamount alertness. If his attitude was at the moment indolent, it was such indolence as drowses between bursts of white-hot activity; a fighting man's aversion to manual labor which, like the hounds, harked back to other generations. Near-by, propped against the rails, rested a repeating rifle, though the people would have told you that the truce in the "South-Hollman war" had been unbroken for two years, and that no clansman need in these halcyon days go armed afield.

CHAPTER III

SALLY clambered lightly over the fence, and started on the last stage of her journey, the climb across the young corn rows. It was a field stood on end, and the hoed ground was uneven; but with no seeming of weariness her red dress flashed steadfastly across the green spears, and her voice was raised to shout: "Hello, Samson!"

The young man looked up and waved a languid greeting. He did not remove his hat or descend from his place of rest, and Sally, who expected no such attention, came smilingly on. Samson was her hero. It seemed quite appropriate that one should have to climb steep acclivities to reach him. Her enamored eyes saw in the top rail of the fence a throne, which she was content to address from the ground level. That he was fond of her and meant some day to marry her she knew, and counted herself the most favored of women. The young men of the neighboring coves, too, knew it, and respected his proprietary rights. If he treated her with indulgent tolerance instead of chivalry, he was merely adopting the accepted attitude of the mountain man for the mountain woman, not unlike that of the red warrior for his squaw. Besides, Sally was still almost a child, and Samson, with his twenty years, looked down from a rank of seniority. He was the legitimate head of the Souths, and some day, when the present truce ended, would be their war-leader with certain blood debts to pay. Since his father had been killed by a rifle shot from ambush, he had never been permitted to forget that, and, had he been left alone, he would still have needed no other mentor than the rankle in his heart.

But, if Samson sternly smothered the glint of tenderness which, at sight of her, rose to his eyes, and recognized her greeting only in casual fashion, it was because such was the requirement of his stoic code. And to the girl who had been so slow of utterance and diffident with the stranger, words now came fast and fluently as she told her story of the man who lay hurt at the foot of the rock.

"Hit hain't long now tell sundown," she urged. "Hurry, Samson, an' git yore mule. I've done give him my promise ter fotch ye right straight back."

Samson took off his hat, and tossed the heavy lock upward from his forehead. His brow wrinkled with doubts.

"What sort of lookin' feller air he?"

While Sally sketched a description, the young man's doubt grew graver.

"This hain't no fit time ter be takin' in folks what we hain't acquainted with," he objected. In the mountains, any time is the time to take in strangers unless there are secrets to be guarded from outside eyes.

"Why hain't it?" demanded the girl. "He's hurt. We kain't leave him layin' thar, kin we?"

Suddenly, her eyes caught sight of the rifle leaning near-by, and straightway they filled with apprehension. Her militant love would have turned to hate for Samson, should he have proved recreant to the mission of reprisal in which he was biding his time, yet the coming of the day when the truce must end haunted her thoughts. Heretofore, that day had always been to her remotely vague—a thing belonging to the future. Now, with a sudden and appalling menace, it seemed to loom across the present. She came close, and her voice sank with her sinking heart.

"What air hit?" she tensely demanded. "What air hit, Samson? What fer hev ye fotched yer gun ter the field?"

The boy laughed. "Oh, hit ain't nothin' pertic'ler," he reassured. "Hit hain't nothin' fer a gal ter fret herself erbout, only I kinder suspicions strangers jest now."

"Air the truce busted?" She put the question in a tense, deep-breathed whisper, and the boy replied casually, almost indifferently.

"No, Sally, hit hain't jest ter say busted, but 'pears like hit's right smart cracked. I reckon, though," he added in half-disgust, "nothin' won't come of hit."

Somewhat reassured, she bethought herself again of her mission.

"This here furriner hain't got no harm in him, Samson," she pleaded. "He 'pears ter be more like a gal than a man. He's real puny. He's got white skin and a bow of ribbon on his neck—an' he paints pictchers."

The boy's face had been hardening with contempt as the description advanced, but at the last words a glow came to his eyes, and he demanded almost breathlessly:

"Paints pictchers? How do ye know that?"

"I seen 'em. He was paintin' one when he fell offen the rock and busted his arm. It's shore es beautiful es—" she broke off, then added with a sudden peal of laughter—"es er pictcher."

The young man slipped down from the fence, and reached for the rifle. The hoe he left where it stood.

"I'll git the nag," he announced briefly, and swung off without further parley toward the curling spiral of smoke that marked a cabin a quarter of a mile below. Ten minutes later, his bare feet swung against the ribs of a gray mule, and his rifle lay balanced across the unsaddled withers. Sally sat mountain fashion behind him, facing straight to the side.

So they came along the creek bed and into the sight of the man who still sat propped against the mossy rock. As Lescott looked up, he closed the case of his watch, and put it back into his pocket with a smile.

"Snappy work, that!" he called out. "Just thirty-three minutes. I didn't believe it could be done."

Samson's face was mask-like, but, as he surveyed the foreigner, only the ingrained dictates of the country's hospitable code kept out of his eyes a gleam of scorn for this frail member of a sex which should be stalwart.

"Howdy?" he said. Then he added suspiciously: "What mout yer business be in these parts, stranger?"

Lescott gave the odyssey of his wanderings, since he had rented a mule at Hixon and ridden through the country, sketching where the mood prompted and sleeping wherever he found a hospitable roof at the coming of the evening.

"Ye come from over on Crippleshin?" The boy flashed the question with a sudden hardening of the voice, and, when he was affirmatively answered, his eyes contracted and bored searchingly into the stranger's face.

"Where'd ye put up last night?"

"Red Bill Hollman's house, at the mouth of Meeting House Fork; do you know the place?"

Samson's reply was curt.

"I knows hit all right."

There was a moment's pause—rather an awkward pause. Lescott's mind began piecing together fragments of conversation he had heard, until he had assembled a sort of mental jig-saw puzzle.

The South-Hollman feud had been mentioned by the more talkative of his informers, and carefully tabooed by others—notable among them his host of last night. It now dawned on him that he was crossing the boundary and coming as the late guest of a Hollman to ask the hospitality of a South.

"I didn't know whose house it was," he hastened to explain, "until I was benighted, and asked for lodging. They were very kind to me. I'd never seen them before. I'm a stranger hereabouts."

Samson only nodded. If the explanation failed to satisfy him, it at least seemed to do so.

"I reckon ye'd better let me holp ye up on thet old mule," he said; "hit's a-comin' on ter be night."

With the mountaineer's aid, Lescott clambered astride the mount, then he turned dubiously.

"I'm sorry to trouble you," he ventured, "but I have a paint box and some materials up there. If you'll bring them down here, I'll show you how to pack the easel, and, by the way," he anxiously added, "please handle that fresh canvas carefully—by the edge—it's not dry yet.

He had anticipated impatient contempt for his artist's impedimenta, but to his surprise the mountain boy climbed the rock, and halted before the sketch with a face that slowly softened to an expression of amazed admiration. Finally, he took up the square of academy board with a tender care of which his rough hands would have seemed incapable, and stood stock still, presenting an anomalous figure in his rough clothes as his eyes grew almost idolatrous. Then, he brought the landscape over to its creator, and, though no word was spoken, there flashed between the eyes of the artist, whose signature gave to a canvas the value of a precious stone and the jeans-clad boy whose destiny was that of the vendetta, a subtle, wordless message. It was the countersign of brothers-in-blood who recognize in each other the bond of a mutual passion.

The boy and the girl, under Lescott's direction, packed the outfit, and stored the canvas in the protecting top of the box. Then, while Sally turned and strode down creek in search of Lescott's lost mount, the two men rode up stream in silence. Finally Samson spoke slowly and diffidently.

"Stranger," he ventured, "ef hit hain't askin' too much, will ye let me see ye paint one of them things?"

"Gladly," was the prompt reply.

Then, the boy added covertly:

"Don't say nothin' erbout hit ter none of these folks. They'd devil me."

The dusk was falling now, and the hollows choking with murk. Over the ridge, the evening star showed in a lonely point of pallor. The peaks, which in a broader light had held their majestic distances, seemed with the falling of night to draw in and huddle close in crowding herds of black masses. The distant tinkling of a cow-bell came drifting down the breeze with a weird and fanciful softness.

"We're nigh home now," said Samson at the end of some minutes' silent plodding. "Hit's right beyond thet thar bend."

Then, they rounded a point of timber, and came upon a small party of men whose attitudes even in the dimming light conveyed a subtle suggestion of portent. Some sat their horses, with one leg thrown across the pommel. Others stood in the road, and a bottle of white liquor was passing in and out among them. At the distance they recognized the gray mule, though even the fact that it carried a double burden was not yet manifest.

"Thet you, Samson?" called an old man's voice, which was still very deep and powerful.

"Hello, Unc' Spicer!" replied the boy.

Then, followed a silence unbroken until the mule reached the group, revealing that besides the boy another man—and a strange man—had joined their number.

"Evenin', stranger," they greeted him, gravely; then again they fell silent, and in their silence was evident constraint.

"This hyar man's a furriner," announced Samson, briefly. "He fell offen a rock, an' got hurt. I 'lowed I'd fotch him home ter stay all night."

The elderly man who had hailed the boy nodded, but with an evident annoyance. It seemed that to him the others deferred as to a commanding officer. The cortège remounted and rode slowly toward the house. At last, the elderly man came alongside the mule, and inquired:

"Samson, where was ye last night?"

"Thet's my business."

"Mebbe hit hain't." The old mountaineer spoke with no resentment, but deep gravity. "We've been powerful oneasy erbout ye. Hev ye heered the news?"

"What news?" The boy put the question noncommittally.

"Jesse Purvy was shot soon this morning."

The boy vouchsafed no reply.

"The mail-rider done told hit. . . . Somebody shot five shoots from the laurel. . . . Purvy hain't died yit. . . . Some says as how his folks has sent ter Lexington fer bloodhounds."

The boy's eyes began to smolder hatefully.

"I reckon," he spoke slowly, "he didn't git shot none too soon."

"Samson!" The old man's voice had the ring of determined authority. "When I dies, ye'll be the head of the Souths, but so long es I'm a-runnin' this hyar fam'ly, I keeps my word ter friend an' foe alike. I reckon Jesse Purvy knows who got yore pap, but up till now no South hain't never busted no truce."

The boy's voice dropped its softness, and took on a shrill crescendo of excitement as he flashed out his retort.

"Who said a South has done busted the truce this time?"

Old Spencer South gazed searchingly at his nephew.

"I hain't a-wantin' ter suspicion ye, Samson, but I know how ye feels about yore pap. I heered thet Bud Spicer come by hyar yistiddy plumb full of liquor, an' 'lowed he'd seed Jesse an' Jim Asberry a-talkin' tergether jest afore yore pap was kilt." He broke off abruptly, then added: "Ye went away from hyar last night, an' didn't git in twell atter sun-up—I just heered the news, an' come ter look fer ye."

"Air you-all 'lowin' thet I shot them shoots from the laurel?" inquired Samson, quietly.

"Ef we-all hain't 'lowin' hit, Samson, we're plumb shore thet Jesse Purvy's folks will 'low hit. They're jest a-holdin' yore life like a hostage fer Purvy's, anyhow. Ef he dies, they'll try ter git ye."

The boy flashed a challenge about the group, which was now drawing rein at Spicer South's yard fence. His eyes were sullen, but he made no answer.

One of the men who had listened in silence now spoke:

"In the fust place, Samson, we hain't a-sayin' ye done hit. In the nex' place, ef ye did do hit, we hain't a-blamin' ye—much. But I reckon them dawgs don't lie, an', ef they trails in hyar, ye'll need us. Thet's why we've done come."

The boy slipped down from his mule, and helped Lescott to dismount. He deliberately unloaded the saddle-bags and kit, and laid them on the top step of the stile, and, while he held his peace, neither denying nor affirming, his kinsmen sat their horses and waited.

Even to Lescott, it was palpable that some of them believed the young heir to clan leadership responsible for the shooting of Jesse Purvy, and that others believed him innocent, yet none the less in danger of the enemy's vengeance. But, regardless of divided opinion, all were alike ready to stand at his back, and all alike awaited his final utterance.

Then, in the thickening gloom, Samson turned at the foot of the stile, and faced the gathering. He stood rigid, and his eyes flashed with deep passion. His hands, hanging at the seams of his jeans breeches, clenched, and his voice came in a slow utterance through which throbbed the tensity of a soul-absorbing bitterness.

"I knowed all 'bout Jesse Purvy's bein' shot. . . . When my pap lay a-dyin' over thar at his house, I was a little shaver ten years old . . . Jesse Purvy hired somebody ter kill him . . . an' I promised my pap that I'd find out who thet man was, an' thet I'd git 'em both—some day. So help me, God Almighty, I'm a-goin' ter git 'em both—some day!" The boy paused and lifted one hand as though taking an oath.

"I'm a-tellin' you-all the truth. . . . But I didn't shoot them shoots this mornin'. I hain't no truce-buster. I gives ye my hand on hit. . . . Ef them dawgs comes hyar, they'll find me hyar, an' ef they hain't liars, they'll go right on by hyar. I don't 'low ter run away, an' I don't 'low ter hide out. I'm agoin' ter stay right hyar. Thet's all I've got ter say ter ye."

For a moment, there was no reply. Then, the older man nodded with a gesture of relieved anxiety.

"Thet's all we wants ter know, Samson," he said, slowly. "Light, men, an' come in."

CHAPTER IV

IN days when the Indian held the Dark and Bloody Grounds a pioneer, felling oak and poplar logs for the home he meant to establish on the banks of a purling water-course, let his axe slip, and the cutting edge gashed his ankle. Since to the discoverer belongs the christening, that water-course became Cripple-shin, and so it is to-day set down on atlas pages. A few miles away, as the crow flies, but many weary leagues as a man must travel, a brother settler, racked with rheumatism, gave to his creek the name of Misery. The two pioneers had come together from Virginia, as their ancestors had come before them from Scotland. Together, they had found one of the two gaps through the mountain wall, which for more than a hundred miles has no other passable rift. Together, and as comrades, they had made their homes, and founded their race. What original grievance had sprung up between their descendants none of the present generation knew—perhaps it was a farm line or disputed title to a pig. The primary incident was lost in the limbo of the past; but for fifty years, with occasional intervals of truce, lives had been snuffed out in the fiercely burning hate of these men whose ancestors had been comrades.

Old Spicer South and his nephew Samson were the direct lineal descendants of the namer of Misery. Their kinsmen dwelt about them: the Souths, the Jaspers,

SALLY AND SAMPSON RESCUE LESCOTT

the Spicers, the Wileys, the Millers and McCagers. Other families, related only by marriage and close association, were, in feud alignment, none the less "Souths." And over beyond the ridge, where the springs and brooks flowed the other way to feed Crippleshin, dwelt the Hollmans, the Purvies, the Asberries, the Hollises and the Daltons—men equally strong in their vindictive fealty to the code of the vendetta.

By mountain standards, old Spicer South was rich. His lands had been claimed when tracts could be had for the taking, and, though he had to make his cross mark when there was a contract to be signed, his instinctive mind was shrewd and far seeing. The tinkle of his cow-bells was heard for a long distance along the creek bottoms. His hillside fields were the richest and his coves the most fertile in that country. His house had several rooms, and, except for those who hated him and whom he hated, he commanded the respect of his fellows. Some day, when a railroad should burrow through his section, bringing the development of coal and timber at the head of the rails, a sleeping fortune would yawn and awake to enrich him. There were black outcroppings along the cliffs, which he knew ran deep in veins of bituminous wealth. But to that time he looked with foreboding, for he had been raised to the standards of his forefathers, and saw in the coming of a new régime a curtailment of personal liberty. For new-fangled ideas he held only the aversion of deep-rooted prejudice. He hoped that he might live out his days, and pass before the foreigner held his land, and the Law became a power stronger than the individual or the clan. The Law was his enemy, because it said to him, "Thou shalt not," when he sought to take the yellow corn which bruising labor had coaxed from scattered rock-strewn fields to his own mash-vat and still. It meant, also, a tyrannous power usually seized and administered by enemies, which undertook to forbid the personal settlement of personal quarrels. But his eyes, which could not read print, could read the signs of the times. He foresaw the inevitable coming of that day. Already, he had given up the worm and mash-vat, and no longer sought to make or sell illicit liquor. That was a concession to the Federal power, which could no longer be successfully fought. State power was still largely a weapon in factional hands, and in his country the Hollmans were the office-holders. To the Hollmans, he could make no concessions. In Samson, born to be the fighting man, reared to be the fighting man, equipped by nature with deep hatreds and tigerish courage, there had cropped out from time to time the restless spirit of the philosopher and a hunger for knowledge. That was a matter in which the old man found his bitterest and most secret apprehension.

It was at this house that George Lescott, distinguished landscape painter of New York and the world-at-large, arrived in the twilight. His first impression was received in shadowy evening mists that gave a touch of the weird. The sweep of the stone-guarded well rose in a yard tramped bare of grass. The house itself, a rambling structure of logs, with additions of undressed lumber, was without lights. The cabin, which had been the pioneer nucleus, still stood windowless and with mud-daubed chimney at the center. About it rose a number of tall poles surmounted by bird-boxes, and at its back loomed the great hump of the mountain.

Whatever enemy might have to be met to-morrow, old Spicer South recognized as a more immediate call upon his attention the wounded guest of to-day. One of the kinsmen proved to have a rude working knowledge of bone-setting, and before the half-hour had passed, Lescott's wrist was in a splint, and his injuries as well tended as possible, which proved to be quite well enough.

By that time, Sally's voice was heard shouting from the stile, and Sally herself appeared with the announcement that she had found and brought in the lost mule.

As Lescott looked at her, standing slight and willowy in the thickening darkness, among the big-boned and slouching figures of the clansmen, she seemed to shrink from the stature of a woman into that of a child, and, as she felt his eyes on her, she timidly slipped farther back into the shadowy door of the cabin, and dropped down on the sill, where, with her hands clasped about her knees, she gazed curiously at himself. She did not speak, but sat immovable with her thick hair falling over her shoulders. The painter recognized that even the interest in him as a new type could not for long keep her eyes from being drawn to the face of Samson, where they lingered, and in that magnetism he read, not the child, but the woman.

Samson was plainly restive from the moment of her arrival, and, when a monosyllabic comment from the taciturn group threatened to reveal to the girl the threatened outbreak of the feud, he went over to her, and inquired:

"Sally, air ye skeered ter go home by yeself?"

As she met the boy's eyes, it was clear that her own held neither nervousness nor fear, and yet there was something else in them—the glint of invitation. She rose from her seat.

"I hain't ter say skeered," she told him, "but, ef ye wants ter walk as fur as the stile, I hain't a-keerin'."

The youth rose, and, taking his hat and rifle, followed her.

Lescott was happily gifted with the power of facile adaptation, and he unobtrusively bent his efforts toward convincing his new acquaintances that, although he was alien to their ways, he was sympathetic and to be trusted. Once that assurance was given, the family talk went on much as though he had been absent, and, as he sat with open ears, he learned the rudiments of the conditions that had brought the kinsmen together in Samson's defense.

At last, Spicer South's sister, a woman who looked older than himself, though she was really younger, appeared, smoking a clay pipe, which she waved toward the kitchen.

"You men kin come in an' eat," she announced; and the mountaineers, knocking the ashes from their pipes, trailed into the kitchen.

The place was lit by the fire in a cavernous hearth where the cooking was still going forward with skillet and crane. The food, coarse and greasy, but not unwholesome, was set on a long table covered with oilcloth. The roughly clad men sat down with a scraping of chair legs, and attacked their provender in business-like silence.

The corners of the room fell into obscurity. Shadows wavered against the sooty rafters, and, before the meal ended, Samson returned and dropped without comment into his chair. Afterward, the men trooped taciturnly out again, and resumed their pipes.

A whippoorwill sent his mournful cry across the treetops, and was answered. Frogs added the booming of their tireless throats. A young moon slipped across an eastern mountain, and livened the creek into a soft shimmer wherein long shadows quavered. The more distant line of mountains showed in a mist of silver, and the nearer heights in blue-gray silhouette. A wizardry of night and softness settled like a benediction, and from the dark door of the house stole the quaint folklore cadence of a rudely thrummed banjo. Lescott strolled over to the stile with every artist instinct stirred. This nocturne of silver and gray and blue at once soothed and intoxicated his imagination. His fingers were itching for a brush.

Then, he heard a movement at his shoulder, and, turning, saw the boy Samson with the moonlight in his eyes, and, besides the moonlight, that sparkle which is the essence of the dreamer's vision. Once more, their glances met and flashed a countersign.

"Hit hain't got many colors in hit," said the boy, slowly, indicating with a sweep of his hand the symphony about them, "but somehow what there is is jest about the right ones. Hit whispers ter a feller, the same as a mammy whispers ter her baby." He paused, then eagerly asked: "Stranger, kin you look at the sky an' the mountings an' hear 'em singin'—with yore eyes?"

The painter felt a thrill of astonishment. It seemed incredible that the boy, whose rude descriptives reflected such poetry of feeling, could be one with the savage young animal who had, two hours before, raised his hand heavenward, and reiterated his oath to do murder in payment of murder.

"Yes," was his slow reply, "every painter must do that. Music and color are two expressions of the same thing—and the thing is Beauty."

The mountain boy made no reply, but his eyes dwelt on the quivering shadows in the water; and Lescott asked cautiously, fearing to wake him from the dreamer to the savage:

"So you are interested in skies and hills and their beauties, too, are you?"

Samson's laugh was half-ashamed, half-defiant.

"Sometimes, stranger," he said, "I 'lows that I hain't much interested in nothin' else."

That there dwelt in the lad something which leaped in response to the clarion call of beauty, Lescott had read in that momentary give and take of their eyes down there in the hollow earlier in the afternoon. But, since then, the painter had seen the other and sterner side, and once more he was puzzled and astonished. Now, he stood anxiously hoping that the boy would permit himself further expression, yet afraid to prompt, lest direct questions bring a withdrawal again into the shell of taciturnity. After a few moments of silence, he slowly turned his head, and glanced at his companion, to find him standing rigidly with his elbows resting on the top palings of the fence. He had thrown his rough hat to the ground, and his face in the pale moonlight was raised. His eyes under the black mane of hair were glowing deeply with a fire of something like exaltation, as he gazed away. It was the expression of one who sees things hidden to the generality; such a light as burns in the eyes of artists and prophets and fanatics, which, to the uncomprehending, seems almost a fire of madness. Samson must have felt Lescott's scrutiny, for he turned with a half-passionate gesture and clenched fists. His face, as he met the glance of the foreigner was sullen, and then, as though in recognition of a brother-spirit, his expression softened, and slowly he began to speak.

"These folks 'round hyar sometimes 'lows I hain't much better'n an idjit because—because I feels thataway. Even Sally"— he caught himself, then went on doggedly—"even Sally kain't see how a man kin keer about things like skies and the color of the hills, ner the way ther sunset splashes the sky clean acrost its aidge, ner how the sunrise comes outen the dark like a gal a-blushin'. They 'lows thet a man had ought ter be studyin' 'bout other things."

He paused, and folded his arms, and his strong fingers grasped his tensed biceps until the knuckles stood out, as he went on:

"I reckon they hain't none of them thet kin hate harder'n me. I reckon they hain't none of 'em thet is more plumb willin' ter fight them thet's rightful enemies, an' yit hit 'pears ter me as thet hain't no reason why a man kain't feel somethin' singin' inside him when Almighty God builds hills like them"—he swept both hands out in a wide circle—"an' makes 'em green in summer, an' lets 'em blaze in red an' yaller in ther fall, an' hangs blue skies over 'em an' makes ther sun shine, an' at night sprinkles 'em with stars an' a moon like

thet!" Again, he paused, and his eyes seemed to ask the corroboration which they read in the expression and nod of the stranger from the mysterious outside world. Then, Samson South spread his hands in a swift gesture of protest, and his voice hardened in timbre as he went on:

"But these folks hyarabouts kain't understand thet. All they sees in the laurel on the hillside, an' the big gray rocks an' the green trees, is breshwood an' timber thet may be hidin' their enemies, or places ter hide out an' lay-way some other feller. I hain't never seen no other country. I don't know whether all places is like these hyar mountings er not, but I knows thet the Lord didn't 'low fer men ter live blind, not seein' no beauty in nothin'; ner not feelin' nothin' but hate an' meanness—ner studyin' 'bout nothin' but deviltry. There hain't no better folks nowhar then my folks, an' thar hain't no meaner folks nowhar then them damned Hollmans, but thar's times when hit 'pears ter me thet the Lord Almighty hain't plumb tickled ter death with ther way things goes hyar along these creeks and coves."

Samson paused, and suddenly the glow died out of his eyes. His features instantly reshaped themselves into their customary mold of stoical hardness. It occurred to him that his outburst had been a long one and strangely out of keeping with his usual taciturnity, and he wondered what this stranger would think of him.

The stranger was marveling. He was seeing in the crude lad at his side warring elements that might build into a unique and strangely interesting edifice of character, and his own speech as he talked there by the palings of the fence in the moonlight was swiftly establishing the foundations of a comradeship between the two.

"Thar's something mighty quare about ye, stranger," said the boy at last, half-shyly. "I been wonderin' why I've talked ter ye like this. I hain't never talked that-away with no other man. Ye jest seemed ter kind of compel me ter do hit. When I says things like thet ter Sally, she gits skeered of me like ef I was plumb crazy, an', ef I talked that-away to the menfolks 'round hyar they'd be sartain I was an idjit."

"That," said Lescott, gravely, "is because they don't understand. I do."

"I kin lay awake nights," said Samson, "an' see them hills and mists an' colors the same es ef they was thar in front of my eyes—an' I kin seem ter hear 'em as well as see 'em."

The painter nodded, and his voice fell into low quotation:

" 'The scarlet of the maple can shake me like the cry
" 'Of bugles going by.' "

The boy's eyes deepened. To Lescott, the thought of bugles conjured up a dozen pictures of marching soldiery under a dozen flags. To Samson South, it suggested only one: militia guarding a battered courthouse, but to both the simile brought a stirring of pulses.

Even in June, the night mists bring a touch of chill to the mountains, and the clansmen shortly carried their chairs indoors. The old woman fetched a pan of red coals from the kitchen, and kindled the logs on the deep hearth. There was no other light, and, until the flames climbed to roaring volume, spreading their zone of yellow brightness, only the circle about the fireplace emerged from the sooty shadows. In the four dark corners of the room were four large beds, vaguely seen, and from one of them still came the haunting monotony of the banjo.

Suddenly, out of the silence, rose Samson's voice keyed to a stubborn note, as though anticipating and challenging contradiction.

"Times is changin' mighty fast. A feller thet grows up plumb ign'rant ain't a-goin' ter have much show."

Old Spicer South drew a contemplative puff at his pipe.

"Ye went ter school twell ye was ten year old, Samson. Thet's a heap more schoolin' then I ever had, an' I've done got along all right."

"Ef my pap had lived"— the boy's voice was almost accusing—"I'd hev larned more then jest ter read an' write en figger a little."

"I hain't got no use fer these newfangled notions." Spicer spoke with careful curbing of his impatience. "Yore pap stood out fer eddycation. He had ideas about law an' all that, an' he talked 'em. He got shot ter death. Yore Uncle John South went down below, an' got ter be a lawyer. He come home hyar, an' undertook ter penitentiary Jesse Purvy, when Jesse was High Sheriff. I reckon ye knows what happened ter him."

Samson said nothing and the older man went on:

"They aimed ter run him outen the mountings."

"They didn't run him none," blazed the boy. "He didn't never leave the mountings."

"No." The family head spoke with the force of a logical climax. "He'd done rented a house down below though, an' was a-fixin' ter move. He staid one day too late. Jesse Purvy hired him shot."

"What of hit?" demanded Samson.

"Yore cousin, Bud Spicer, was eddicated. He 'lowed in public thet Micah Hollman an' Jesse Purvy was runnin' a murder partnership. Somebody called him ter the door of his house in the night-time ter borry a lantern—an' shot him ter death."

"What of hit?"

"Thar's jist this much of hit. Hit don't seem ter pay the South family ter go a-runnin' attar newfangled idees. They gets too much notion of goin' ter law—an' thet's plumb fatal. Ye'd better stay where ye b'longs, Samson, an' let good enough be."

"Why hain't ye done told about all the rest of the Souths thet didn't hev no eddication," suggested the youngest South, "thet got killed off jest as quick as them as had hit?"

CHAPTER V

WHILE Spicer South and his cousins had been sustaining themselves or building up competences by tilling their soil, the leaders of the other faction were basing larger fortunes on the profits of merchandise and trade. So, although Spicer South could neither read nor write, his chief enemy, Micah Hollman, was to outward seeming an urbane and fairly equipped man of affairs. Judged by their heads, the clansmen were rougher and more illiterate on Misery, and in closer touch with civilization on Crippleshin. A deeper scrutiny showed this seeming to be one of the strange anomalies of the mountains.

Micah Hollman had established himself at Hixon, that shack town which had passed of late years from feudal county seat to the section's one point of contact with the outside world; a town where the ancient and modern orders brushed shoulders; where the new was tolerated, but dared not become aggressive. Directly across the street from the court-house stood an ample frame building, on whose side wall was emblazoned the legend: "Hollman's Mammoth Department Store." That was the secret stronghold of Hollman power. He had always spoken deploringly of that spirit of lawlessness which had given the mountains a bad name. He himself, he declared, believed that the best assets of any community were tenets of peace and brotherhood. Any mountain man or foreigner who came to town was sure of a welcome from Judge Micah Hollman, who added to his title of storekeeper that of magistrate.

As the years went on, the proprietor of the "Mammoth Department Store" found that he had money to lend and, as a natural sequence, mortgages stored away in his strong box. To the cry of distress, he turned a sympathetic ear. His infectious smile and suave manner won him fame as "the best-hearted man in the mountains." Steadily and unostentatiously, his fortune fattened.

When the railroad came to Hixon, it found in Judge Hollman a "public-spirited citizen." Incidentally, the timber that it hauled and the coal that its flat cars carried down to the Bluegrass went largely to his consignees. He had so astutely anticipated coming events that, when the first scouts of capital sought options, they found themselves constantly referred to Judge Hollman. No wheel, it seemed, could turn without his nod. It was natural that the genial storekeeper should become the big man of the community and inevitable that the one big man should become the dictator. His inherited place as leader of the Hollmans in the feud he had seemingly passed on as an obsolete prerogative.

Yet, in business matters, he was found to drive a hard bargain, and men came to regard it the part of good policy to meet rather than combat his requirements. It was essential to his purposes that the officers of the law in his county should be in sympathy with him. Sympathy soon became abject subservience. When a South had opposed Jesse Purvy in the primary as candidate for High Sheriff, he was found one day lying on his face with a bullet-riddled body. It may have been a coincidence which pointed to Jim Asberry, the judge's nephew, as the assassin. At all events, the judge's nephew was a poor boy, and a charitable Grand Jury declined to indict him.

In the course of five years, several South adherents, who had crossed Hollman's path, became victims of the laurel ambuscade. The theory of coincidence was strained. Slowly, the rumor grew and persistently spread, though no man would admit having fathered it, that before each of these executions star-chamber conferences had been held in the rooms above Micah Hollman's "Mammoth Department Store." It was said that these exclusive sessions were attended by Judge Hollman, Sheriff Purvy and certain other gentlemen selected by reason of their marksmanship. When one of these victims fell, John South had just returned from a law school "down below," wearing "fotched-on" clothing and thinking "fotched-on" thoughts. He had amazed the community by demanding the right to assist in probing and prosecuting the affair. He had then shocked the community into complete paralysis by requesting the Grand Jury to indict not alone the alleged assassin, but also his employers, whom he named as Judge Hollman and Sheriff Purvy. Then, he, too, fell under a bolt from the laurel.

That was the first public accusation against the bland capitalist, and it carried its own prompt warning against repetition. The Judge's High Sheriff and chief ally retired from office, and went abroad only with a bodyguard. Jesse Purvy had built his store at a cross roads twenty-five miles from the railroad. Like Hollman, he had won a reputation for open-handed charity, and was liked—and hated. His friends were legion. His enemies were so numerous that he apprehended violence not only from the Souths, but also from others who nursed grudges in no way related to the line of feud cleavage. The Hollman-Purvy combination had retained enough of its old power to escape the law's retribution and to hold its dictatorship, but the efforts of John South had not been altogether bootless. He had ripped away two masks, and their erstwhile wearers could no longer hold their old semblance of law-abiding philanthropists. Jesse Purvy's home was the show place of the country side. To the traveler's eye, which had grown accustomed to hovel life and squalor, it offered a reminder of the richer Bluegrass. Its walls were weather-boarded and painted, and its roof two stories high. Commodious verandahs looked out over pleasant orchards, and in the same enclosure stood the two frame buildings of his store—for he, too, combined merchandise with baronial powers. But back of the place rose the mountainside, on which Purvy never looked without dread. Twice, its impenetrable thickets had spat at him. Twice, he had recovered from wounds that would have taken a less-charmed life. And in grisly reminder of the terror which clouded the peace of his days stood the eight-foot log stockade at the rear of the place which the proprietor had built to shield his daily journeys between house and store. But Jesse Purvy was not deluded by his escapes. He knew that he was "marked down." For years, he had seen men die by his own plotting, and he himself must in the end follow by a similar road. Rumor had it that he wore a shirt of mail, certain it is that he walked in the expectancy of death.

"Why don't you leave the mountains?" strangers had asked; and to each of them Purvy had replied with a shrug of his shoulders and a short laugh: "This is where I belong."

But the years of strain were telling on Jesse Purvy. The robust, full-blooded face was showing deep lines; his flesh was growing flaccid; his glance tinged with quick apprehension. He told his intimates that he realized "they'd get him," yet he sought to prolong his term of escape.

The creek purled peacefully by the stile; the apple and peach trees blossomed and bore fruit at their appointed time, but the householder, when he walked between his back door and the back door of the store, hugged his stockade, and hurried his steps.

Yesterday morning, Jesse Purvy had risen early as usual, and, after a satisfying breakfast, had gone to his store to arrange for the day's business. One or two of his henchmen, seeming loafers, but in reality a bodyguard, were lounging within call. A married daughter was chatting with her father while her young baby played among the barrels and cracker boxes.

The daughter went to a rear window, and gazed up at the mountain. The cloudless skies were still in hiding behind a curtain of mist. The woman was idly watching the vanishing fog wraiths, and her father came over to her side. Then, the baby cried, and she stepped back. Purvy himself remained at the window. It was a thing he did not often do. It left him exposed, but the most cautiously guarded life has its moments of relaxed vigilance. He stood there possibly thirty seconds, then a sharp fusillade of clear reports barked out and was shattered by the hills into a long reverberation. With a hand clasped to his chest, Purvy turned, walked to the middle of the floor, and fell.

The henchmen rushed to the open sash. They leaped out, and plunged up the mountain, tempting the assassin's fire, but the assassin was satisfied. The mountain was again as quiet as it had been at dawn. Its impenetrable mask of green was blank and unresponsive. Somewhere in the cool of the dewy treetops a squirrel barked. Here and there, the birds saluted the sparkle and freshness of June. Inside, at the middle of the store, Jesse Purvy shifted his head against his daughter's knee, and said, as one stating an expected event:

"Well, they've got me."

An ordinary mountaineer would have been carried home to die in the darkness of a dirty and windowless shack. The long-suffering star of Jesse Purvy ordained otherwise. He might go under or he might once more beat his way back and out of the quicksands of death. At all events, he would fight for life to the last gasp.

Twenty miles away in the core of the wilderness, removed from a railroad by a score of semi-perpendicular miles, a fanatic had once decided to found a school. The fact that the establishment in this place of such a school as his mind pictured was sheer madness and impossibility did not in the least deter him. It was a thing that could not be done, and it was a thing that he had done none the less.

Now a faculty of ten men, like himself holding degrees of Masters of Dreams, taught such as cared to come such things as they cared to learn. Substantial two- and three-storied buildings of square-hewn logs lay grouped in a sort of Arts and Crafts village around a clean-clipped campus. The Stagbone College property stretched twenty acres square at the foot of a hill. The drone of its own saw-mill came across the valley. In a book-lined library, wainscoted in natural woods of three colors, the original fanatic often sat reflecting pleasurably on his folly. Higher up the hillside stood a small, but model, hospital, with a modern operating table and a case of surgical instruments, which, it was said, the State could not surpass. These things had been the gifts of friends who liked such a type of God-inspired madness. A "fotched-on" trained nurse was in attendance. From time to time, eminent Bluegrass surgeons came to Hixon by rail, rode twenty miles on mules, and held clinics on the mountainside.

To this haven, Jesse Purvy, the murder lord, was borne in a litter carried on the shoulders of his dependents. Here, as his steadfast guardian star decreed, he found two prominent medical visitors, who hurried him to the operating table. Later, he was removed to a white bed, with the June sparkle in his eyes, pleasantly modulated through drawn blinds, and the June rustle and bird chorus in his ears—and his own thoughts in his brain.

Conscious, but in great pain, Purvy beckoned Jim Asberry and Aaron Hollis, his chiefs of bodyguard, to his bedside, and waved the nurse back out of hearing.

"If I don't get well," he said, feebly, "there's a job for you two boys. I reckon you know what it is?"

They nodded, and Asberry whispered a name:

"Samson South?"

"Yes," Purvy spoke in a weak whisper; but the old vindictiveness was not smothered. "You got the old man, I reckon you can manage the cub. If you don't, he'll get you both one day."

The two henchmen scowled.

"I'll git him to-morrer," growled Asberry. "Thar hain't no sort of use in a-waitin'."

"No!" For an instant Purvy's voice rose out of its weakness to its old staccato tone of command, a tone which brought obedience. "If I get well, I have other plans. Never mind what they are. That's my business. If I don't die, leave him alone, until I give other orders." He lay back and fought for breath. The nurse came over with gentle insistence, ordering quiet, but the man, whose violent life might be closing, had business yet to discuss with his confidential vassals. Again, he waved her back.

"If I get well," he went on, "and Samson South is killed meanwhile, I won't live long either. It would be my life for his. Keep close to him. The minute you hear of my death—get him." He paused again, then supplemented, "You two will find something mighty interestin' in my will."

It was afternon when Purvy reached the hospital, and, at nightfall of the same day, there arrived at his store's entrance, on stumbling, hard-ridden mules, several men, followed by two tawny hounds whose long ears flapped over their lean jaws, and whose eyes were listless and tired, but whose black muzzles wrinkled and sniffed with that sensitive instinct which follows the man-scent. The ex-sheriff's family were instituting proceedings independent of the Chief's orders. The next morning, this party plunged into the mountain tangle, and beat the cover with the bloodhounds in leash.

The two gentle-faced dogs picked their way between the flowering rhododendrons, the glistening laurels, the feathery pine sprouts and the moss-covered rocks. They went gingerly and alertly on ungainly, cushioned feet. Just as their masters were despairing, they came to a place directly over the store, where a branch had been bent back and hitched to clear the outlook, and where a boot heel had crushed the moss. There one of them raised his nose high into the air, opened his mouth, and let out a long, deep-chested bay of discovery.

CHAPTER VI

GEORGE LESCOTT had known hospitality of many brands and degrees. He had been the lionized celebrity in places of fashion. He had been the guest of equally famous brother artists in the cities of two hemispheres, and, since sincere painting had been his pole-star, he had gone where his art's wanderlust beckoned. His most famous canvas, perhaps, was his "Prayer Toward Mecca," which hangs in the Metropolitan. It shows, with a power that holds the observer in a compelling grip, the wonderful colors of a sunset across the desert. One seems to feel the renewed life that comes to the caravan with the welcome of the oasis. One seems to hear the grunting of the kneeling camels and the stirring of the date palms. The Bedouins have spread their prayer-rugs, and behind them burns the west. Lescott caught in that, as he had caught in his mountain sketches, the broad spirit of the thing. To paint that canvas, he had endured days of racking camel-travel and burning heat and thirst. He had followed the lure of transitory beauty to remote sections of the world. The present trip was only one of many like it, which had brought him into touch with varying peoples and distinctive types of life. He told himself that never had he found men at once so crude and so courteous as these hosts, who, facing personal perils, had still time and willingness to regard his comfort.

They could not speak grammatically; they could hardly offer him the necessities of life, yet they gave all they had, with a touch of courtliness.

In a fabric soiled and threadbare, one may sometimes trace the tarnished design that erstwhile ran in gold through a rich pattern. Lescott could not but think of some fine old growth gone to seed and decay, but still bearing at its crest a single beautiful blossom while it held in its veins a poison.

Such a blossom was Sally. Her scarlet lips and sweet, grave eyes might have been the inheritance gift of some remote ancestress whose feet, instead of being bare and brown, had trod in high-heeled, satin slippers. When Lord Fairfax governed the Province of Virginia, that first Sally, in the stateliness of panniered brocades and powdered hair, may have tripped a measure to the harpsichord or spinet. Certain it is she trod with no more untrammeled grace than her wild descendant. For the nation's most untamed and untaught fragment is, after all, an unamalgamated stock of British and Scottish bronze, which now and then strikes back to its beginning and sends forth a pure peal from its corroded bell-metal. In all America is no other element whose blood is so purely what the Nation's was at birth.

The coming of the kinsmen, who would stay until the present danger passed, had filled the house. The four beds in the cabin proper were full, and some slept on floor mattresses. Lescott, because a guest and wounded, was given a small room aside. Samson, however, shared his quarters in order to perform any service that an injured man might require. It had been a full and unusual day for the painter, and its incidents crowded in on him in retrospect and drove off the possibility of sleep. Samson, too, seemed wakeful, and in the isolation of the dark room the two men fell into conversation, which almost lasted out the night. Samson went into the confessional. This was the first human being he had ever met to whom he could unburden his soul.

The thirst to taste what knowledge lay beyond the hills; the unnamed wanderlust that had at times brought him a restiveness so poignant as to be agonizing; the undefined attuning of his heart to the beauty of sky and hill; these matters he had hitherto kept locked in guilty silence. To the men of his clan these were eccentricities bordering on the abnormal; frailties to be passed over with charity, as one would pass over the infirmities of an afflicted child. To Samson they looked as to a sort of feud Messiah. His destiny was stern, and held no place for dreams. For him, they could see only danger in an insatiable hunger for learning. In a weak man, a school-teacher or parson sort of a man, that might be natural, but this young cock of their walk was being reared for the pit—for conflict. What was important in him was stamina, and sharp strength of spur. These qualities he had proven from infancy. Weakening proclivities must be eliminated.

So, the boy had been forced to keep throttled impulses that, for being throttled, had smoldered and set on fire the inner depths of his soul. During long nights, he had secretly digested every available book. Yet, in order to vindicate himself from the unspoken accusation of growing weak, of forgetting his destiny, he had courted trouble, and sought combat. He was too close to his people's point of view for perspective. He shared their idea that the thinking man weakens himself as a fighting man. He had never heard of a Cyrano de Bergerac, or an Aramis. Now had come some one with whom he could talk: a man who had traveled and followed, without shame, the beckoning of Learning and Beauty. At once, the silent boy found himself talking intimately, and the artist found himself studying one of the strangest human paradoxes he had yet seen.

In a cove, or lowland pocket, stretching into the mountainside, lay the small and meager farm of the Widow Miller. The Widow Miller was a "South"; that is to say she fell, by tie of marriage, under the protection of the clan-head. She lived alone with her fourteen-year-old son and her sixteen-year-old daughter. The daughter was Sally. At sixteen, the woman's figure had been as pliantly slim, her step as light as was her daughter's now. At forty, she was withered. Her face was hard, and her lips had forgotten how to smile. Her shoulders sagged, and she was an old woman, who smoked her pipe, and taught her children that rudimentary code of virtue to which the mountains subscribe. She believed in a brimstone hell and a personal devil. She believed that the whale had swallowed Jonah, but she thought that "Thou shalt not kill" was an edict enunciated by the Almighty with mental reservations.

The sun rose on the morning after Lescott arrived, the mists lifted, and the cabin of the Widow Miller stood revealed. Against its corners several hogs scraped their bristled backs with satisfied grunts. A noisy rooster cocked his head inquiringly sidewise before the open door, and, hopping up to the sill, invaded the main room. A towsled-headed boy made his way to the barn to feed the cattle, and a red patch of color, as bright and tuneful as a Kentucky cardinal, appeared at the door between the morning-glory vines. The red patch of color was Sally.

She made her way, carrying a bucket, to the spring, where she knelt down and gazed at her own image in the water. Her grave lips broke into a smile, as the reflected face, framed in its mass of reflected red hair, gazed back at her. Then, the smile broke into a laugh.

"Hello, Sally Miller!" she gaily accosted her picture-self. "How air ye this mornin', Sally Miller?"

She plunged her face deep in the cool spring, and raised it to shake back her hair, until the water flew from its masses. She laughed again, because it was another day, and because she was alive. She waded about for a while where the spring joined the creek, and delightedly watched the schools of tiny, almost transparent, minnows that darted away at her coming. Then, standing on a rock, she paused with her head bent, and listened until her ears caught the faint tinkle of a cowbell, which she recognized. Nodding her head joyously, she went off into the woods, to emerge at the end of a half-hour later, carrying a pail of milk, and smiling joyously again—because it was almost breakfast time.

But, before going home, she set down her bucket by the stream, and, with a quick glance toward the house to make sure that she was not observed, climbed through the brush, and was lost to view. She followed a path that her own feet had made, and after a steep course upward, came upon a bald face of rock, which stood out storm-battered where a rift went through the backbone of the ridge. This point of vantage commanded the other valley. From its edge, a white oak, dwarfed, but patriarchal, leaned out over an abrupt drop. No more sweeping or splendid view could be had within miles, but it was not for any reason so general that Sally had made her pilgrimage. Down below, across the treetops, were a roof and a chimney from which a thread of smoke rose in an attenuated shaft. That was Spicer South's house, and Samson's home. The girl leaned against the gnarled bowl of the white oak, and waved toward the roof and chimney. She cupped her hands, and raised them to her lips like one who means to shout across a great distance, then she whispered so low that only she herself could hear:

"Hello, Samson South!"

She stood for a space looking down, and forgot to laugh, while her eyes grew religiously and softly deep, then, turning, she ran down the slope. She had performed her morning devotions.

That day at the house of Spicer South was an off day. The kinsmen who had stopped for the night stayed on through the morning. Nothing was said of the possibility of trouble. The men talked crops, and tossed horseshoes in the yard; but no one went to work in the fields, and all remained within easy call. Only young Tamarack Spicer, a raw-boned nephew, wore a sullen face, and made a great show of cleaning his rifle and pistol. He even went out in the morning, and practised at target-shooting, and Lescott, who was still very pale and weak, but able to wander about at will, gained the impression that in young Tamarack he was seeing the true type of the mountain "bad-man." Tamarack seemed willing to feed that idea, and admitted apart to Lescott that, while he obeyed the dictates of the truce, he found them galling, and was straining at his leash.

"I don't take nothin' offen nobody," he sullenly confided. "The Hollmans gives me my half the road."

Shortly after dinner, he disappeared, and, when the afternoon was well advanced, Samson, too, with his rifle on his arm, strolled toward the stile. Old Spicer South glanced up, and removed his pipe from his mouth to inquire:

"Whar be ye a-goin'?"

"I hain't a-goin' fur," was the non-committal response.

"Meybe hit mout be a good idea ter stay round clost fer a spell." The old man made the suggestion casually, and the boy replied in the same fashion.

"I hain't a-goin' ter be outen sight."

He sauntered down the road, but, when he had passed out of vision, he turned sharply into the woods, and began climbing. His steps carried him to the rift in the ridge where the white oak stood sentinel over the watch-tower of rock. As he came over the edge from one side, his bare feet making no sound, he saw Sally sitting there, with her hands resting on the moss and her eyes deeply troubled. She was gazing fixedly ahead, and her lips were trembling. At once Samson's face grew black. Some one had been making Sally unhappy. Then, he saw beyond her a standing figure, which the tree trunk had hitherto concealed. It was the loose-knitted figure of young Tamarack Spicer.

"In course," Spicer was saying, "we don't 'low Samson shot Jesse Purvy, but them Hollmans 'll 'spicion him, an' I heered just now, thet them dawgs was trackin' straight up hyar from the mouth of Misery. They'll git hyar against sundown."

Samson leaped violently forward. With one hand, he roughly seized his cousin's shoulder, and wheeled him about.

"Shet up!" he commanded. "What damn fool stuff hev ye been tellin' Sally?"

For an instant, the two clansmen stood fronting each other. Samson's face was set and wrathful. Tamarack's was surly and snarling. "Hain't I got a license ter tell Sally the news?" he demanded.

"Nobody hain't got no license," retorted the younger man in the quiet of cold anger, "ter tell Sally nothin' thet'll fret her."

"She air bound ter know hit all pretty soon. Them dawgs——"

"Didn't I tell ye ter shet up?" Samson clenched his fists, and took a step forward. "Ef ye opens yore mouth again, I'm a-goin' ter smash hit. Now, git!"

Tamarack Spicer's face blackened, and his teeth showed. His right hand swept to his left arm-pit. Outwardly he seemed weaponless, but Samson knew that concealed beneath the hickory shirt was a holster, worn mountain fashion.

"What air ye a-reachin' atter, Tam'rack?" he inquired, his lips twisting in amusement.

"Thet's my business."

"Well, get hit out—or git out yeself, afore I throws ye offen the clift."

Sally showed no symptoms of alarm. Her confidence in her hero was absolute. The boy lifted his hand, and pointed off down the path. Slowly and with incoherent muttering, Spicer took himself away. Then only did Sally rise. She came over, and laid a hand on Samson's shoulder. In her blue eyes, the tears were welling.

"Samson," she whispered, "ef they're atter ye, come ter my house. I kin hide ye out. Why didn't ye tell me Jesse Purvy'd done been shot?"

"Hit tain't nothin' ter fret about, Sally," he assured her. He spoke awkwardly, for he had been trained to regard emotion as unmanly. "Thar hain't no danger."

She gazed searchingly into his eyes, and then, with a short sob, threw her arms around him, and buried her face on his shoulder.

"Ef anything happens ter ye, Samson," she said, brokenly, "hit'll jest kill me. I couldn't live withouten ye, Samson. I jest couldn't do hit!"

The boy took her in his arms, and pressed her close. His eyes were gazing off over her bent head, and his lips twitched. He drew his features into a scowl, because that was the only expression with which he could safeguard his feelings. His voice was husky.

"I reckon, Sally," he said, "I couldn't live withouten you, neither."

The party of men who had started at morning from Jesse Purvy's store had spent a hard day. The roads followed creek-beds, crossing and recrossing waterways in a fashion that gave the bloodhounds a hundred baffling difficulties. Often, their noses lost the trail, which had at first been so surely taken. Often, they circled and whined, and halted in perplexity, but each time they came to a point where, at the end, one of them again raised his muzzle skyward, and gave voice.

Toward evening, they were working up Misery along a course less broken. The party halted for a moment's rest, and, as the bottle was passed, the man from Lexington, who had brought the dogs and stayed to conduct the chase, put a question:

"What do you call this creek?"

"Hit's Misery."

"Does anybody live on Misery that—er—that you might suspect?"

The Hollmans laughed.

"This creek is settled with Souths thicker'n hops."

The Lexington man looked up. He knew what the name of South meant to a Hollman.

"Is there any special South, who might have a particular grudge?"

"The Souths don't need no partic'lar grudge, but thar's young Samson South. He's a wildcat."

"He lives this way?"

"These dogs air a-makin' a bee-line fer his house." Jim Hollman was speaking. Then he added: "I've done been told that Samson denies doin' the shootin', an' claims he kin prove an alibi."

The Lexington man lighted his pipe, and poured a drink of red whiskey into a flask cup.

"He'd be apt to say that," he commented, coolly. "These dogs haven't any prejudice in the matter. I'll stake my life on their telling the truth."

An hour later, the group halted again. The master of hounds mopped his forehead.

"Are we still going toward Samson South's house?" he inquired.

"We're about a quarter from hit now, an' we hain't never varied from the straight road."

"Will they be apt to give us trouble?"

Jim Hollman smiled.

"I hain't never heered of no South submittin' ter arrest by a Hollman."

The trailers examined their firearms, and loosened their holster-flaps. The dogs went forward at a trot.

CHAPTER VII

FROM time to time that day, neighbors had ridden up to Spicer South's stile, and drawn rein for gossip. These men brought bulletins as to the progress of the hounds, and near sundown, as a postscript to their information, a volley of gunshot signals sounded from a mountain top. No word was spoken, but in common accord the kinsmen rose from their chairs, and drifted toward their leaning rifles.

"They're a-comin' hyar," said the head of the house, curtly. "Samson ought ter be home. Whar's Tam'-rack?"

No one had noticed his absence until that moment, nor was he to be found. A few minutes later, Samson's figure swung into sight, and his uncle met him at the fence.

"Samson, I've done asked ye all the questions I'm a-goin' ter ask ye," he said, "but them dawgs is makin' fer this house. They've jest been sighted a mile below."

Samson nodded.

"Now"—Spicer South's face hardened—"I owns down thar ter the road. No man kin cross that fence withouten I choose ter give him leave. Ef ye wants ter go indoors an' stay thar, ye kin do hit—an' no dawg ner no man hain't a-goin' ter ask ye no questions. But, ef ye sees fit ter face hit out, I'd love ter prove ter these hyar men thet us Souths don't break our word.

We done agreed ter this truce. I'd like ter invite 'em in, an' let them damn dawgs sniff round the feet of every man in my house—an' then, when they're plumb teetotally damn satisfied, I'd like ter tell 'em all ter go ter hell. Thet's the way I feels, but I'm a-goin' ter do jest what ye says."

Lescott did not overhear the conversation in full, but he saw the old man's face work with suppressed passion, and he caught Samson's louder reply.

"When them folks gets hyar, Uncle Spicer, I'm a-goin' ter be a-settin' right out thar in front. I'm plumb willin' ter invite 'em in." Then, the two men turned toward the house.

Already the other clansmen had disappeared noiselessly through the door or around the angles of the walls. The painter found himself alone in a scene of utter quiet, unmarred by any note that was not peaceful. He had seen many situations charged with suspense and danger, and he now realized how thoroughly freighted was the atmosphere about Spicer South's cabin with the possibilities of bloodshed. The moments seemed to drag interminably. In the expressionless faces that so quietly vanished; in the absolutely calm and businesslike fashion in which, with no spoken order, every man fell immediately into his place of readiness and concealment, he read an ominous portent that sent a current of apprehension through his arteries. Into his mind flashed all the historical stories he had heard of the vendetta life of these wooded slopes, and he wondered if he was to see another chapter enacted in the next few minutes, while the June sun and soft shadows drowsed so quietly across the valley.

While he waited, Spicer South's sister, the prematurely aged crone, appeared in the kitchen door with the clay pipe between her teeth, and raised a shading hand to gaze off up the road. She, too, understood the tenseness of the situation as her grim, but unflinching, features showed; yet even in her feminine eyes was no shrinking and on her face, inured to fear, was no tell-tale signal beyond a heightened pallor.

Spicer South looked up at her, and jerked his head toward the house.

"Git inside, M'lindy," he ordered, curtly, and without a word she, too, turned and disappeared.

But there was another figure, unseen, its very presence unsuspected, watching from near by with a pounding heart and small fingers clutching in wild terror at a palpitant breast. In this country, where human creatures seemed to share with the "varmints" the faculty of moving unseen and unheard, the figure had come stealthily to watch—and pray.

When Samson had heard that signal of the gunshots from a distant peak, he had risen from the rock where he sat with Sally. He had said nothing of the issue he must go to meet; nothing of the enemies who had brought dogs, confident that they would make their run straight to his lair. That subject had not been mentioned between them since he had driven Tamarack away that afternoon, and reassured her. He had only risen casually, as though his action had no connection with the signal of the rifles, and said:

"Reckon I'll be a-goin'."

And Sally had said nothing either, except good-by, and had turned her face toward her own side of the ridge, but, as soon as he had passed out of sight, she had wheeled and followed noiselessly, slipping from rhododendron clump to laurel thicket as stealthily as though she were herself the object of an enemy's attack. She knew that Samson would have sent her back, and she knew that a crisis was at hand, and that she could not support the suspense of awaiting the news. She must see for herself.

And now, while the stage was setting itself, the girl crouched trembling a little way up the hillside, at the foot of a titanic poplar. About her rose gray, moss-covered rocks and the fronds of clinging ferns. At her feet bloomed wild flowers for which she knew no names except those with which she had herself christened them, "sunsetty flowers" whose yellow petals suggested to her imagination the western skies, and "fairy cups and saucers."

She was not trembling for herself, though, if a fusillade broke out below, the masking screen of leafage would not protect her from the pelting of stray bullets. Her small face was pallid, and her blue eyes wide-stretched and terrified. With a catch in her throat, she shifted from her crouching attitude to a kneeling posture, and clasped her hands desperately, and raised her face, while her lips moved in prayer. She did not pray aloud, for even in her torment of fear for the boy she loved, her mountain caution made her noiseless—and the God to whom she prayed could hear her equally well in silence.

"Oh, God," pleaded the girl, brokenly, "I reckon ye knows thet them Hollmans is atter Samson, an' I reckons ye knows he hain't committed no sin. I reckon ye knows, since ye knows all things, thet hit'll kill me ef I loses him, an' though I hain't nobody but jest Sally Miller, an' ye air Almighty God, I wants ye ter hear my prayin', an' pertect him."

Fifteen minutes later, Lescott, standing at the fence, saw a strange cavalcade round the bend of the road. Several travel-stained men were leading mules, and holding two tawny and impatient dogs in leash. In their number, the artist recognized his host of two nights ago.

They halted at a distance, and in their faces the artist read dismay, for, while the dogs were yelping confidently and tugging at their cords, young Samson South—who should, by their prejudiced convictions, be hiding out in some secret stronghold—sat at the top step of the stile, smoking his pipe, and regarded them with a lack-luster absence of interest. Such a calm reception was uncanny. The trailers felt sure that in a moment more the dogs would fall into accusing excitement. Logically, these men should be waiting to receive them behind barricaded doors. There must be some hidden significance. Possibly, it was an invitation to walk into ambuscade. No doubt, unseen rifles covered their approach, and the shooting of Purvy was only the inaugural step to a bloody and open outbreak of the war. After a whispered conference, the Lexington man came forward alone. Old Spicer South had been looking on from the door, and was now strolling out to meet the envoy, unarmed.

And the envoy, as he came, held his hands unnecessarily far away from his sides, and walked with an ostentatious show of peace.

"Evenin', stranger," hailed the old man. "Come right in."

"Mr. South," began the dog-owner, with some embarrassment, "I have been employed to furnish a pair of bloodhounds to the family of Jesse Purvy, who has been shot."

"I heerd tell thet Purvy was shot," said the head of the Souths in an affable tone, which betrayed no deeper note of interest than neighborhood gossip might have elicited.

"I have no personal interest in the matter," went on the stranger, hastily, as one bent on making his attitude clear, "except to supply the dogs and manage them. I do not in any way direct their course; I merely follow."

"Ye can't hardly fo'ce a dawg." Old Spicer sagely nodded his head as he made the remark. "A dawg jest natcher'ly follers his own nose."

"Exactly—and they have followed their noses here." The Lexington man found the embarrassment of his position growing as the colloquy proceeded. "I want to ask you whether, if these dogs want to cross your fence, I have your permission to let them?"

The cabin in the yard was utterly quiet. There was no hint of the seven or eight men who rested on their arms behind its half-open door. The master of the house crossed the stile, the low sun shining on his shock of gray hair, and stood before the man-hunter. He spoke so that his voice carried to the waiting group in the road.

"Ye're plumb welcome ter turn them dawgs loose, an' let 'em ramble, stranger. Nobody hain't a-goin' ter hurt 'em. I sees some fellers out thar with ye thet mustn't cross my fence. Ef they does"—the voice rang menacingly—"hit'll mean that they're a-bustin' the truce—an' they won't never go out ag'in. But you air safe in hyar. I gives yer my hand on thet. Ye're welcome, an' yore dawgs is welcome. I hain't got nothin' 'gainst dawgs thet comes on four legs, but I shore bars the two-legged kind."

There was a murmur of astonishment from the road. Disregarding it, Spicer South turned his face toward the house.

"You boys kin come out," he shouted, "an' leave yore guns inside."

The leashes were slipped from the dogs. They leaped forward, and made directly for Samson, who sat as unmoving as a lifeless image on the top step of the stile. Up on the hillside the fingernails of Sally Miller's clenched hands cut into the flesh, and the breath stopped between her parted and bloodless lips. There was a half-moment of terrific suspense, then the beasts clambered by the seated figure, passing on each side and circled aimlessly about the yard—their quest unended. They sniffed indifferently about the trouser legs of the men who sauntered indolently out of the door. They trotted into the house and out again, and mingled with the mongrel home pack that snarled and growled hostility for this invasion. Then, they came once more to the stile. As they climbed out, Samson South reached up and stroked a tawny head, and the bloodhound paused a moment to wag its tail in friendship, before it jumped down to the road, and trotted gingerly onward.

"I'm obliged to you, sir," said the man from the Bluegrass, with a voice of immense relief.

The moment of suspense seemed past, and, in the relief of the averted clash, the master of hounds forgot that his dogs stood branded as false trailers. But, when he rejoined the group in the road, he found himself looking into surly visages, and the features of Jim Hollman in particular were black in their scowl of smoldering wrath.

"Why didn't ye axe him," growled the kinsman of the man who had been shot, "whar the other feller's at?"

"What other fellow?" echoed the Lexington man.

Jim Hollman's voice rose truculently, and his words drifted, as he meant them to, across to the ears of the clansmen who stood in the yard of Spicer South.

"Them dawgs of your'n come up Misery a-hellin'. They hain't never turned aside, an', onless they're plumb ornery no-'count curs thet don't know their business, they come for some reason. They seemed mighty interested in gittin' hyar. Axe them fellers in thar who's been hyar thet hain't hyar now? Who is ther feller thet got out afore we come hyar."

At this veiled charge of deceit, the faces of the Souths again blackened, and the men near the door of the house drifted in to drift presently out again, swinging discarded Winchesters at their sides. It seemed that, after all, the incident was not closed. The man from Lexington, finding himself face to face with a new difficulty, turned and argued in a low voice with the Hollman leader. But Jim Hollman, whose eyes were fixed on Samson, refused to talk in a modulated tone, and he shouted his reply:

"I hain't got nothin' ter whisper about," he proclaimed. "Go axe 'em who hit war thet got away from hyar."

Old Spicer South stood leaning on his fence, and his rugged countenance stiffened. He started to speak, but Samson rose from the stile, and said, in a composed voice:

"Let me talk ter this feller, Unc' Spicer." The old man nodded, and Samson beckoned to the owner of the dogs.

"We hain't got nothin' ter say ter them fellers with ye," he announced, briefly. "We hain't axin' 'em no questions, an' we hain't answerin' none. Ye done come hyar with dawgs, an' we hain't stopped ye. We've done answered all the questions them dawgs hes axed. We done treated you an' yore houn's plumb friendly. Es fer them other men, we hain't got nothin' ter say ter 'em. They done come hyar because they hoped they could git me in trouble. They done failed. Thet road belongs ter the county. They got a license ter travel hit, but this strip right hyar hain't ther healthiest section they kin find. I reckon ye'd better advise 'em ter move on."

The Lexington man went back. For a minute or two, Jim Hollman sat scowling down in indecision from his saddle. Then, he admitted to himself that he had done all he could do without becoming the aggressor. For the moment, he was beaten. He looked up, and from the road one of the hounds raised its voice and gave cry. That baying afforded an excuse for leaving, and Jim Hollman seized upon it.

"Go on," he growled. "Let's see what them damned curs hes ter say now."

Mounting, they kicked their mules into a jog. From the men inside the fence came no note of derision; no hint of triumph. They stood looking out with expressionless, mask-like faces until their enemies had passed out of sight around the shoulder of the mountain. The Souths had met and fronted an accusation made after the enemy's own choice and method. A jury of two hounds had acquitted them. It was not only because the dogs had refused to recognize in Samson a suspicious character that the enemy rode on grudgingly convinced, but, also, because the family, which had invariably met hostility with hostility, had so willingly courted the acid test of guilt or innocence.

Samson, passing around the corner of the house, caught a flash of red up among the green clumps of the mountainside, and, pausing to gaze at it, saw it disappear into the thicket of brush. He knew then that Sally had followed him, and why she had done it, and, framing a stern rebuke for the foolhardiness of the venture, he plunged up the acclivity in pursuit. But, as he made his way cautiously, he heard around the shoulder of a mass of piled-up sandstone a shaken sobbing, and, slipping toward it, found the girl bent over with her face in her hands, her slender body convulsively heaving with the weeping of reaction, and murmuring half-incoherent prayers of thanksgiving for his deliverance.

"Sally!" he exclaimed, hurrying over and dropping to his knees beside her. "Sally, thar hain't nothin' ter fret about, little gal. Hit's all right."

She started up at the sound of his voice, and then, pillowing her head on his shoulder, wept tears of happiness. He sought for words, but no words came, and his lips and eyes, unused to soft expressions, drew themselves once more into the hard mask with which he screened his heart's moods.

Days passed uneventfully after that. The kinsmen dispersed to their scattered coves and cabins. Now and again came a rumor that Jesse Purvy was dying, but always hard on its heels came another to the effect that the obdurate fighter had rallied, though the doctors held out small encouragement of recovery.

One day Lescott, whose bandaged arm gave him much pain, but who was able to get about, was strolling not far from the house with Samson. They were following a narrow trail along the mountainside, and, at a sound no louder than the falling of a walnut, the boy halted and laid a silencing hand on the painter's shoulder. Then followed an unspoken command in his companion's eyes. Lescott sank down behind a rock, cloaked with glistening rhododendron leafage, where Samson had already crouched, and become immovable and noiseless. They had been there only a short time when they saw another figure slipping quietly from tree to tree below them.

For a time, the mountain boy watched the figure, and the painter saw his lips draw into a straight line, and his eyes narrow with a glint of tense hate. Yet, a moment later, with a nod to follow, the boy unexpectedly rose into view, and his features were absolutely expressionless.

"Mornin', Jim," he called.

The slinking stranger whirled with a start, and an instinctive motion as though to bring his rifle to his shoulder. But, seeing Samson's peaceable manner, he smiled, and his own demeanor became friendly.

"Mornin', Samson."

"Kinder stranger in this country, hain't ye, Jim?" drawled the boy who lived there, and the question brought a sullen flush to the other's cheekbones.

"Jest a-passin' through," he vouchsafed.

"I reckon ye'd find the wagon road more handy," suggested Samson. "Some folks might 'spicion ye fer stealin' long through the timber."

The skulking traveler decided to lie plausibly. He laughed mendaciously. "That's the reason, Samson. I was kinder skeered ter go through this country in the open."

Samson met his eye steadily, and said slowly:

"I reckon, Jim, hit moughtn't be half es risky fer ye ter walk upstandin' along Misery, es ter go a-crouchin'. Ye thinks ye've been a shadderin' me. I knows jest whar ye've been all the time. Ye lies when ye talks 'bout passin' through. Ye've done been spyin' hyar, ever since Jesse Purvy got shot, an' all thet time ye've done been watched yeself. I reckon hit'll be healthier fer ye ter do yore spyin' from t'other side of the ridge. I reckon yer allowin' ter git me ef Purvy dies, but we're watchin' ye."

Jim Asberry's face darkened, but he said nothing. There was nothing to say. He was discovered in the enemy's country, and must accept the enemy's terms.

"This hyar time, I lets ye go back," said Samson, "fer the reason thet I'm tryin' like all hell ter keep this truce. But ye must stay on yore side, or else ride the roads open. How is Purvy terday?"

"He's mighty porely," replied the other, in a sullen voice.

"All right. Thet's another reason why hit hain't healthy fer ye over hyar."

The spy turned, and made his way over the mountain.

"Damn him!" muttered Samson, his face twitching, as the other was lost in the undergrowth. "Some day I'm a-goin' ter git him."

Tamarack Spicer did not at once reappear, and, when one of the Souths met another in the road, the customary dialogue would be: "Heered anything of Tamarack?" . . . "No, hev you?" . . . "No, nary a word."

As Lescott wandered through the hills, his unhurt right hand began crying out for action and a brush to nurse. As he watched, day after day, the unveiling of the monumental hills, and the transitions from hazy wraith-like whispers of hues, to strong, flaring riot of color, this fret of restlessness became actual pain. He was wasting wonderful opportunity and the creative instinct in him was clamoring.

One morning, when he came out just after sunrise to the tin wash basin at the well, the desire to paint was on him with compelling force. The hills ended near their bases like things bitten off. Beyond lay limitless streamers of mist, but, while he stood at gaze, the filmy veil began to lift and float higher. Trees and mountains grew taller. The sun, which showed first as a ghost-like disc of polished aluminum, struggled through orange and vermilion into a sphere of living flame. It was as though the Creator were breathing on a formless void to kindle it into a vital and splendid cosmos, and between the dawn's fog and the radiance of full day lay a dozen miracles. Through rifts in the streamers, patches of hillside and sky showed for an ethereal moment or two in tender and transparent coloration, like spirit-reflections of emerald and sapphire. . . . Lescott heard a voice at his side.

"When does ye 'low ter commence paintin'?"

It was Samson. For answer, the artist, with his unhurt hand, impatiently tapped his bandaged wrist.

"Ye still got yore right hand, hain't ye?" demanded the boy. The other laughed. It was a typical question. So long as one had the trigger finger left, one should not admit disqualification.

"You see, Samson,' he explained, "this isn't precisely like handling a gun. One must hold the palette; mix the colors; wipe the brushes and do half a dozen equally necessary things. It requires at least two perfectly good hands. Many people don't find two enough."

"But hit only takes one ter do the paintin', don't hit?"

"Yes."

"Well"—the boy spoke diffidently but with enthusiasm—"between the two of us, we've got three hands. I reckon ye kin larn me how ter do them other things fer ye."

Lescott's surprise showed in his face, and the lad swept eagerly on.

"Mebby hit hain't none of my business, but, all day yestiddy an' the day befo', I was a-studyin' 'bout this here thing, an' I hustled up an' got thet corn weeded, an' now I'm through. Ef I kin help ye out, I thought mebby—" He paused, and looked appealingly at the artist.

Lescott whistled, and then his face lighted into contentment.

"To-day, Samson," he announced, "Lescott, South and Company get busy."

It was the first time he had seen Samson smile, and, although the expression was one of sheer delight, inherent somberness loaned it a touch of the wistful.

When, an hour later, the two set out, the mountain boy carried the paraphernalia, and the old man standing at the door watched them off with a half-quizzical, half-disapproving glance. To interfere with any act of courtesy to a guest was not to be thought of, but already the influence on Samson of this man from the other world was disquieting his uncle's thoughts. With his mother's milk, the boy had fed on hatred of his enemies. With his training, he had been reared to feudal animosities. Disaffection might ruin his usefulness. Besides the sketching outfit, Samson carried his rifle. He led the painter by slow stages, since the climb proved hard for a man still somewhat enfeebled, to the high rock which Sally visited each morning.

As the boy, with remarkable aptitude, learned how to adjust the easel and arrange the paraphernalia, Lescott sat drinking in through thirsty eyes the stretch of landscape he had determined to paint.

It was his custom to look long and studiously through closed lashes before he took up his brush. After that he began laying in his key tones and his fundamental sketching with an incredible swiftness, having already solved his problems of composition and analysis.

Then, while he painted, the boy held the palette, his eyes riveted on the canvas, which was growing from a blank to a mirror of vistas—and the boy's pupils became deeply hungry. He was not only looking. He was seeing. His gaze took in the way the fingers held the brushes; the manner of mixing the pigments, the detail of method. Sometimes, when he saw a brush dab into a color whose use he did not at once understand, he would catch his breath anxiously, then nod silently to himself as the blending vindicated the choice. He did not know it, but his eye for color was as instinctively true as that of the master.

As the day wore on, they fell to talking, and the boy again found himself speaking of his fettered restiveness in the confinement of his life; of the wanderlust which stirred him, and of which he had been taught to feel ashamed.

During one of their periods of rest, there was a rustle in the branches of a hickory, and a gray shape flirted a bushy tail. Samson's hand slipped silently out, and the rifle came to his shoulder. In a moment it snapped, and a squirrel dropped through the leaves.

"Jove!" exclaimed Lescott, admiringly. "That was neat work. He was partly behind the limb—at a hundred yards."

"Hit warn't nothin'," said Samson, modestly. "Hit's a good gun." He brought back his quarry, and affectionately picked up the rifle. It was a repeating Winchester, carrying a long steel-jacketed bullet of special caliber, but it was of a pattern fifteen years old, and fitted with target sights.

"That gun," Samson explained, in a lowered and reverent voice, "was my pap's. I reckon there hain't enough money in the world ter buy hit offen me."

Slowly, in a matter-of-fact tone, he began a story without decoration of verbiage—straightforward and tense in its simplicity. As the painter listened, he began to understand; the gall that had crept into this lad's blood before his weaning became comprehensible. . . . Killing Hollmans was not murder. . . . It was duty. He seemed to see the smoke-blackened cabin and the mother of the boy sitting, with drawn face, in dread of the hours. He felt the racking nerve-tension of a life in which the father went forth each day leaving his family in fear that he would not return. Then, under the spell of the unvarnished recital, he seemed to witness the crisis when the man, who had dared repudiate the lawless law of individual reprisal, paid the price of his insurgency.

A solitary friend had come in advance to break the news. His face, when he awkwardly commenced to speak, made it unnecessary to put the story into words. Samson told how his mother had turned pallid, and stretched out her arm gropingly for support against the door-jamb. Then the man had found his voice with clumsy directness.

"They've got him."

The small boy had reached her in time tc break her fall as she fainted, but, later, when they brought in the limp, unconscious man, she was awaiting them with regained composure. An expression came to her face at that moment, said the lad, which had never left it during the remaining two years of her life. For some hours, "old" Henry South, who in a less-wasting life would hardly have been middle-aged, had lingered. They were hours of conscious suffering, with no power to speak, but before he died he had beckoned his ten-year-old son to his bedside, and laid a hand on the dark, rumpled hair. The boy bent forward, his eyes tortured and tearless, and his little lips tight pressed. The old man patted the head, and made a feeble gesture toward the mother who was to be widowed. Samson had nodded.

"I'll take keer of her, pap," he had fervently sworn.

Then, Henry South had lifted a tremulous finger, and pointed to the wall above the hearth. There, upon a set of buck-antlers, hung the Winchester rifle. And, again, Samson had nodded, but this time he did not speak. That moment was to his mind the most sacred of his life; it had been a dedication to a purpose. The arms of the father had then and there been bequeathed to the son, and with the arms a mission for their use. After a brief pause, Samson told of the funeral. He had a remarkable way of visualizing in rough speech the desolate picture; the wailing mourners on the bleak hillside, with the November clouds hanging low and trailing their wet streamers. A "jolt-wagon" had carried the coffin in lieu of a hearse. Saddled mules stood tethered against the picket fence. The dogs that had followed their masters started a rabbit close by the open grave, and split the silence with their yelps as the first clod fell. He recalled, too, the bitter voice with which his mother had spoken to a kinsman as she turned from the ragged burying ground, where only the forlorn cedars were green. She was leaning on the boy's thin shoulders at the moment. He had felt her arm stiffen with her words, and, as her arm stiffened, his own positive nature stiffened with it.

"Henry believed in law and order. I did, too. But they wouldn't let us have it that way. From this day on, I'm a-goin' to raise my boy to kill Hollmans."

CHAPTER VIII

WITH his father's death Samson's schooling had ended. His responsibility now was farm work and the roughly tender solicitude of a young stoic for his mother. His evenings before the broad fireplace he gave up to a devouring sort of study, but his books were few.

When, two years later, he laid the body of the Widow South beside that of his father in the ragged hillside burying-ground, he turned his nag's head away from the cabin where he had been born, and rode over to make his home at his Uncle Spicer's place. He had, in mountain parlance, "heired" a farm of four hundred acres, but a boy of twelve can hardly operate a farm, even if he be so stalwart a boy as Samson. His Uncle Spicer wanted him, and he went, and the head of the family took charge of his property as guardian; placed a kinsman there to till it, on shares, and faithfully set aside for the boy what revenue came from the stony acres. He knew that they would be rich acres when men began to dig deeper than the hoe could scratch, and opened the veins where the coal slept its unstirring sleep. The old man had not set such store by learning as had Samson's father, and the little shaver's education ended, except for what he could wrest from stinted sources and without aid. His mission of "killing Hollmans" was not forgotten. There had years ago been one general battle at a primary, when the two factions fought for the control that would insure the victors safety against "law trouble," and put into their hands the weapons of the courts.

Samson was far too young to vote, but he was old enough to fight, and the account he had given of himself, with the inherited rifle smoking, gave augury of fighting effectiveness. So sanguinary had been this fight, and so dangerously had it focused upon the warring clans the attention of the outside world, that after its indecisive termination, they made the compact of the present truce. By its terms, the Hollmans held their civil authority, and the Souths were to be undisturbed dictators beyond Misery. For some years now, the peace had been unbroken save by sporadic assassinations, none of which could be specifically enough charged to the feud account to warrant either side in regarding the contract as broken. Samson, being a child, had been forced to accept the terms of this peace bondage. The day would come when the Souths could agree to no truce without his consent. Such was, in brief, the story that the artist heard while he painted and rested that day on the rock. Had he heard it in New York, he would have discounted it as improbable and melodramatic. Now, he knew that it was only one of many such chapters in the history of the Cumberlands. The native point of view even became in a degree acceptable. In a system of trial by juries from the vicinage, fair and bold prosecutions for crime were impossible, and such as pretended to be so were bitterly tragic farces. He understood why the families of murdered fathers and brothers preferred to leave the punishment to their kinsmen in the laurel, rather than to their enemies in the jury-box.

The day of painting was followed by others like it. The disabling of Lescott's left hand made the constant companionship of the boy a matter that needed no explanation or apology, though not a matter of approval to his uncle.

Another week had passed without the reappearance of Tamarack Spicer.

One afternoon, Lescott and Samson were alone on a cliff-protected shelf, and the painter had just blocked in with umber and neutral tint the crude sketch of his next picture. In the foreground was a steep wall, rising palisade-like from the water below. A kingly spruce-pine gave the near note for a perspective which went away across a valley of cornfields to heaping and distant mountains. Beyond that range, in a slender ribbon of pale purple, one saw the ridge of a more remote and mightier chain.

The two men had lost an hour huddled under a canopy beneath the cannonading of a sudden storm. They had silently watched titanic battallions of thunder-clouds riding the skies in gusty puffs of gale, and raking the earth with lightning and hail and water. The crags had roared back echoing defiance, and the great trees had lashed and bent and tossed like weeds in the buffeting. Every gully had become a stream, and every gulch-rock a waterfall. Here and there had been a crashing of spent timber, and now the sun had burst through a rift in the west, and flooded a segment of the horizon with a strange, luminous field of lemon. About this zone of clarity were heaped masses of gold-rimmed and rose-edged clouds, still inky at their centers.

"My God!" exclaimed the mountain boy abruptly. "I'd give 'most anything ef I could paint that."

Lescott rose smilingly from his seat before the easel, and surrendered his palette and sheaf of brushes.

"Try it," he invited.

For a moment, Samson stood hesitant and overcome with diffidence; then, with set lips, he took his place, and experimentally fitted his fingers about a brush, as he had seen Lescott do. He asked no advice. He merely gazed for awhile, and then, dipping a brush and experimenting for his color, went to sweeping in his primary tones.

The painter stood at his back, still smiling. Of course, the brush-stroke was that of the novice. Of course, the work was clumsy and heavy. But what Lescott noticed was not so much the things that went on canvas as the mixing of colors on the palette, for he knew that the palette is the painter's heart, and its colors are the elements of his soul. What a man paints on canvas is the sum of his acquirement; but the colors he mixes are the declarations of what his soul can see, and no man can paint whose eyes are not touched with the sublime. At that moment, Lescott knew that Samson had such eyes.

The splashes of lemon yellow that the boy daubed above the hills might have been painted with a brush dipped in the sunset. The heavy clouds with their gossamer edgings had truth of tone and color. Then the experimenter came to the purple rim of mountain tops.

There was no color for that on the palette, and he turned to the paint-box.

"Here," suggested Lescott, handing him a tube of Payne's Gray: "is that what you're looking for?"

Samson read the label, and decisively shook his head.

"I'm a-goin' atter them hills," he declared. "There hain't no gray in them thar mountings."

"Squeeze some out, anyway." The artist suited the action to the word, and soon Samson was experimenting with a mixture.

"Why, that hain't no gray," he announced, with enthusiasm; "that thar's sort of ashy purple." Still, he was not satisfied. His first brush-stroke showed a trifle dead and heavy. It lacked the soft lucid quality that the hills held, though it was close enough to truth to have satisfied any eye save one of uncompromising sincerity. Samson, even though he was hopelessly daubing, and knew it, was sincere, and the painter at his elbow caught his breath, and looked on with the absorption of a prophet, who, listening to childish prattle, yet recognizes the gift of prophecy. The boy dabbled for a perplexed moment among the pigments, then lightened up his color with a trace of ultramarine. Unconsciously, the master heaved a sigh of satisfaction. The boy "laid in" his far hills, and turned.

"Thet's the way hit looks ter me," he said, simply.

"That's the way it is," commended his critic.

For a while more, Samson worked at the nearer hills, then he rose.

"I'm done," he said. "I hain't a-goin' ter fool with them thar trees an' things. I don't know nothing erbout thet. I can't paint leaves an' twigs an' birdsnests.

What I likes is mountings, an' skies, an' sech-like things."

Lescott looked at the daub before him. A less-trained eye would have seen only the daub, just as a poor judge of horse-flesh might see only awkward joints and long legs in a weanling colt, though it be bred in the purple.

"Samson," he said, earnestly, "that's all there is to art. It's the power to feel the poetry of color. The rest can be taught. The genius must work, of course—work, work, work, and still work, but the Gift is the power of seeing true—and, by God, boy, you have it."

His words rang exultantly.

"Anybody with eyes kin see," deprecated Samson, wiping his fingers on his jeans trousers.

"You think so? To the seer who reads the passing shapes in a globe of crystal, it's plain enough. To any other eye, there is nothing there but transparency." Lescott halted, conscious that he was falling into metaphor which his companion could not understand, then more quietly he went on: "I don't know how you would progress, Samson, in detail and technique, but I know you've got what many men have struggled a lifetime for, and failed. I'd like to have you study with me. I'd like to be your discoverer. Look here."

The painter sat down, and speedily went to work. He painted out nothing. He simply toned, and, with precisely the right touch here and there, softened the crudeness, laid stress on the contrast, melted the harshness, and, when he rose, he had built, upon the rough cornerstone of Samson's laying, a picture.

"That proves it," he said. "I had only to finish. I

"AIN'T THAT A FINE THING FOR A SOUTH TO BE DOIN'!"

didn't have to undo. Boy, you're wasting yourself. Come with me, and let me make you. We all pretend there is no such thing, in these days, as sheer genius; but, deep down, we know that, unless there is, there can be no such thing as true art. There is genius and you have it." Enthusiasm was again sweeping him into an unintended outburst.

The boy stood silent. Across his countenance swept a conflict of emotions. He looked away, as if taking counsel with the hills.

"It's what I'm a-honin' fer," he admitted at last. "Hit's what I'd give half my life fer. . . . I mout sell my land, an' raise the money. . . . I reckon hit would take passels of money, wouldn't hit?" He paused, and his eyes fell on the rifle leaning against the tree. His lips tightened in sudden remembrance. He went over and picked up the gun, and, as he did so, he shook his head.

"No," he stolidly declared; "every man to his own tools. This here's mine."

Yet, when they were again out sketching, the temptation to play with brushes once more seized him, and he took his place before the easel. Neither he nor Lescott noticed a man who crept down through the timber, and for a time watched them. The man's face wore a surly, contemptuous grin, and shortly it withdrew.

But, an hour later, while the boy was still working industriously and the artist was lying on his back, with a pipe between his teeth, and his half-closed eyes gazing up contentedly through the green of overhead branches, their peace was broken by a guffaw of derisive laughter. They looked up, to find at their backs a semi-circle of scoffing humanity. Lescott's impulse was to laugh, for only the comedy of the situation at the moment struck him. A stage director, setting a comedy scene with that most ancient of jests, the gawking of boobs at some new sight, could hardly have improved on this tableau. At the front stood Tamarack Spicer, the returned wanderer. His lean wrist was stretched out of a ragged sleeve all too short, and his tattered "jimmy" was shoved back over a face all a-grin. His eyes were blood-shot with recent drinking, but his manner was in exaggerated and cumbersome imitation of a rural master of ceremonies. At his back were the raw-boned men and women and children of the hills, to the number of a dozen. To the front shuffled an old, half-witted hag, with thin gray hair and pendulous lower lip. Her dress was patched and colorless. Her back was bent with age and rheumatism. Her feet were incased in a pair of man's brogans. She stared and snickered, and several children, taking the cue, giggled, but the men, save Tamarack himself, wore troubled faces, as though recognizing that their future chieftain had been discovered in some secret shame. They were looking on their idol's feet of clay.

"Ladies and gentle-*men*," announced Tamarack Spicer, in a hiccoughy voice, "swing yo' partners an' sashay forward. See the only son of the late Henry South engaged in his mar-ve-lous an' heretofore undiscovered occupation of doin' fancy work. Ladies and gentle-*men*, after this here show is conclooded, keep your seats for the concert in the main tent. This here famous performer will favor ye with a little exhibition of plain an' fancy sock-darnin'."

The children snickered again. The old woman shuffled forward.

"Samson," she quavered, "I didn't never 'low ter see ye doin' no sich woman's work as thet."

After the first surprise, Samson had turned his back on the group. He was mixing paint at the time and he proceeded to experiment with a fleeting cloud effect, which would not outlast the moment. He finished that, and, reaching for the palette-knife, scraped his fingers and wiped them on his trousers' legs. Then, he deliberately rose.

Without a word he turned. Tamarack had begun his harangue afresh. The boy tossed back the long lock from his forehead, and then, with an unexpectedly swift movement, crouched and leaped. His right fist shot forward to Tamarack Spicer's chattering lips, and they abruptly ceased to chatter as the teeth were driven into their flesh. Spicer's head snapped back, and he staggered against the onlookers, where he stood rocking on his unsteady legs. His hand swept instinctively to the shirt-concealed holster, but, before it had connected, both of Samson's fists were playing a terrific tattoo on his face. The inglorious master of the show dropped, and lay groggily trying to rise.

The laughter died as suddenly as Tamarack's speech. Samson stepped back again, and searched the faces of the group for any lingering sign of mirth or criticism. There was none. Every countenance was sober and expressionless, but the boy felt a weight of unuttered disapproval, and he glared defiance. One of the older onlookers spoke up reproachfully.

"Samson, ye hadn't hardly ought ter a-done that. He was jest a funnin' with ye."

"Git him up on his feet. I've got somethin' ter say ter him." The boy's voice was dangerously quiet. It was his first word. They lifted the fallen cousin, whose entertainment had gone astray, and led him forward grumbling, threatening and sputtering, but evincing no immediate desire to renew hostilities.

"Whar hev ye been?" demanded Samson.

"Thet's my business," came the familiar mountain phrase.

"Why wasn't yer hyar when them dawgs come by? Why was ye the only South thet runned away, when they was smellin' round fer Jesse Purvy's assassin?"

"I didn't run away." Tamarack's blood-shot eyes flared wickedly. "I knowed thet ef I stayed 'round hyar with them damned Hollmans stickin' their noses inter our business, I'd hurt somebody. So, I went over inter the next county fer a spell. You fellers mout be able to take things offen the Hollmans, but I hain't."

"Thet's a damned lie," said Samson, quietly. "Ye runned away, an' ye runned in the water so them dawgs couldn't trail ye—ye done hit because ye shot them shoots at Jesse Purvy from the laurel—because ye're a truce-bustin', murderin' bully thet shoots off his face, an' is skeered to fight." Samson paused for breath, and went on with regained calmness. "I've knowed all along ye was the man, an' I've kept quiet because ye're my kin. If ye've got anything else ter say, say hit. But, ef I ever ketches yer talkin' about me, or talkin' ter Sally, I'm a-goin' ter take ye by the scruff of the neck, an' drag ye plumb inter Hixon, an' stick ye in the jail-house. An' I'm a-goin' ter tell the High Sheriff that the Souths spits ye outen their mouths. Take him away." The crowd turned and left the place. When they were gone, Samson seated himself at his easel again, and picked up his palette.

CHAPTER IX

LESCOTT had come to the mountains anticipating a visit of two weeks. His accident had resolved him to shorten it to the nearest day upon which he felt capable of making the trip out to the railroad. Yet, June had ended; July had burned the slopes from emerald to russet-green; August had brought purple tops to the ironweed, and still he found himself lingering. And this was true although he recognized a growing sentiment of disapproval for himself. He knew indubitably that he stood charged with the offense for which Socrates was invited to drink the hemlock: "corrupting the morals of the youth, and teaching strange gods." Feeling the virtue of his teaching, he was unwilling as Socrates to abandon the field. In Samson he thought he recognized twin gifts: a spark of a genius too rare to be allowed to flicker out, and a potentiality for constructive work among his own people, which needed for its perfecting only education and experience. Having aroused a soul's restiveness in the boy, he felt a direct responsibility for it and him, to which he added a deep personal regard. Though the kinsmen looked upon him as an undesirable citizen, bringing teachings which they despised, the hospitality of old Spicer South continued unbroken and a guarantee of security on Misery.

"Samson," he suggested one day when they were alone, "I want you to come East. You say that gun is your tool, and that each man must stick to his own. You are in part right, in part wrong. A man uses any tool better for understanding other tools. You have the right to use your brains and talents to the full."

The boy's face was somber in the intensity of his mental struggle, and his answer had that sullen ring which was not really sullenness at all, but self-repression.

"I reckon a feller's biggest right is to stand by his kinfolks. Unc' Spicer's gittin' old. He's done been good ter me. He needs me here."

"I appreciate that. He will be older later. You can go now, and come back to him when he needs you more. If what I urged meant disloyalty to your people, I would cut out my tongue before I argued for it. You must believe me in that. I want you to be in the fullest sense your people's leader. I want you to be not only their Samson—but their Moses."

The boy looked up and nodded. The mountaineer is not given to demonstration. He rarely shakes hands, and he does not indulge in superlatives of affection. He loved and admired this man from the outside world, who seemed to him to epitomize wisdom, but his code did not permit him to say so.

"I reckon ye aims ter be friendly, all right," was his conservative response.

The painter went on earnestly:

"I realize that I am urging things of which your people disapprove, but it is only because they misunderstand that they do disapprove. They are too close, Samson, to see the purple that mountains have when they are far away. I want you to go where you can see the purple. If you are the sort of man I think, you won't be beguiled. You won't lose your loyalty. You won't be ashamed of your people."

"I reckon I wouldn't be ashamed," said the youth. "I reckon there hain't no better folks nowhar."

"I'm sure of it. There are going to be sweeping changes in these mountains. Conditions here have stood as immutably changeless as the hills themselves for a hundred years. That day is at its twilight. I tell you, I know what I'm talking about. The State of Kentucky is looking this way. The State must develop, and it is here alone that it can develop. In the Bluegrass, the possibilities for change are exhausted. Their fields lie fallow, their woodlands are being stripped. Tobacco has tainted the land. It has shouldered out the timber, and is turning forest to prairie. A land of fertile loam is vying with cheap soil that can send almost equal crops to market. There is no more timber to be cut, and when the timber goes the climate changes. In these hills lie the sleeping sources of wealth. Here are virgin forests and almost inexhaustible coal veins. Capital is turning from an orange squeezed dry, and casting about for fresher food. Capital has seen your hills. Capital is inevitable, relentless, omnipotent. Where it comes, it makes its laws. Conditions that have existed undisturbed will vanish. The law of the feud, which militia and courts have not been able to abate, will vanish before Capital's breath like the mists when the sun strikes them. Unless you learn to ride the waves which will presently sweep over your country, you and your people will go under. You may not realize it, but that is true. It is written."

The boy had listened intently, but at the end he smiled, and in his expression was something of the soldier who scents battle, not without welcome.

"I reckon if these here fellers air a-comin' up here ter run things, an' drownd out my folks, hit's a right good reason fer me ter stay here—an' holp my folks."

"By staying here, you can't help them. It won't be work for guns, but for brains. By going away and coming back armed with knowledge, you can save them. You will know how to play the game."

"I reckon they won't git our land, ner our timber, ner our coal, without we wants ter sell hit. I reckon ef they tries thet, guns will come in handy. Things has stood here like they is now, fer a hundred years. I reckon we kin keep 'em that-away fer a spell longer." But it was evident that Samson was arguing against his own belief; that he was trying to bolster up his resolution and impeached loyalty, and that at heart he was sick to be up and going to a world which did not despise "eddication." After a little, he waved his hand vaguely toward "down below."

"Ef I went down thar," he questioned suddenly and irrelevantly, "would I hev' ter cut my ha'r?"

"My dear boy," laughed Lescott, "I can introduce you in New York studios to many distinguished gentlemen who would feel that their heads had been shorn if they let their locks get as short as yours. In New York, you might stroll along Broadway garbed in turban and a *burnouse* without greatly exciting anybody. I think my own hair is as long as yours."

"Because," doggedly declared the mountaineer, "I wouldn't allow nobody ter make me cut my ha'r."

"Why?" questioned Lescott, amused at the stubborn inflection.

"I don't hardly know why—" He paused, then admitted with a glare as though defying criticism: "Sally likes hit that-away—an' I won't let nobody dictate ter me, that's all."

The leaven was working, and one night Samson announced to his Uncle from the doorstep that he was "studyin' erbout goin' away fer a spell, an' seein' the world."

The old man laid down his pipe. He cast a reproachful glance at the painter, which said clearly, though without words:

"I have opened my home to you and offered you what I had, yet in my old age you take away my mainstay." For a time, he sat silent, but his shoulders hunched forward with a sag which they had not held a moment before. His seamed face appeared to age visibly and in the moment. He ran one bony hand through his gray mane of hair.

"I 'lowed you was a-studyin' erbout thet, Samson," he said, at last. "I've done ther best fer ye I knowed. I kinder 'lowed thet from now on ye'd do the same fer me. I'm gittin' along in years right smart. . . ."

"Uncle Spicer," interrupted the boy, "I reckon ye knows thet any time ye needed me I'd come back."

The old man's face hardened.

"Ef ye goes," he said, almost sharply, "I won't never send fer ye. Any time ye ever wants ter come back, ye knows ther way. Thar'll be room an' victuals fer ye hyar."

"I reckon I mout be a heap more useful ef I knowed more."

"I've heered fellers say that afore. Hit hain't never turned out thet way with them what has left the mountings. Mebby they gets more useful, but they don't git useful ter us. Either they don't come back at all, or mebby they comes back full of newfangled notions—an' ashamed of their kinfolks. Thet's the way, I've noticed, hit gen'ally turns out."

Samson scorned to deny that such might be the case with him, and was silent. After a time, the old man went on again in a weary voice, as he bent down to loosen his brogans and kick them noisily off on to the floor:

"The Souths hev done looked to ye a good deal, Samson. They 'lowed they could depend on ye. Ye hain't quite twenty-one yet, an' I reckon I could refuse ter let ye sell yer prop'ty. But thar hain't no use tryin' ter hold a feller when he wants ter quit. Ye don't 'low ter go right away, do ye?"

"I hain't plumb made up my mind ter go at all," said the boy, shamefacedly. "But, ef I does go, I hain't a-goin' yit. I hain't spoke ter nobody but you about hit yit."

Lescott felt reluctant to meet his host's eyes at breakfast the next morning, dreading their reproach, but, if Spicer South harbored resentment, he meant to conceal it, after the stoic's code. There was no hinted constraint of cordiality. Lescott felt, however, that in Samson's mind was working the leaven of that unspoken accusation of disloyalty. He resolved to make a final play, and seek to enlist Sally in his cause. If Sally's hero-worship could be made to take the form of ambition for Samson, she might be brought to relinquish him for a time, and urge his going that he might return strengthened. Yet, Sally's devotion was so instinctive and so artless that it would take compelling argument to convince her of any need of change. It was Samson as he was whom she adored. Any alteration was to be distrusted. Still, Lescott set out one afternoon on his doubtful mission. He was more versed in mountain ways than he had been. His own ears could now distinguish between the bell that hung at the neck of Sally's brindle heifer and those of old Spicer's cows. He went down to the creek at the hour when he knew Sally, also, would be making her way thither with her milk-pail, and intercepted her coming.

As she approached, she was singing, and the man watched her from the distance. He was a landscape painter and not a master of *genre* or portrait. Yet, he wished that he might, before going, paint Sally. She was really, after all, a part of the landscape, as much a thing of nature and the hills as the hollyhocks that had come along the picket-fences. She swayed as gracefully and thoughtlessly to her movements as do strong and pliant stems under the breeze's kiss. Artfulness she had not; nor has the flower: only the joy and fragrance of a brief bloom. It was that thought which just now struck the painter most forcibly. It was shameful that this girl and boy should go on to the hard and unlighted life that inevitably awaited them, if neither had the opportunity of development. She would be at forty a later edition of the Widow Miller. He had seen the widow. Sally's charm must be as ephemeral under the life of illiterate drudgery and perennial child-bearing as her mother's had been. Her shoulders, now so gloriously straight and strong, would sag, and her bosom shrink, and her face harden and take on that drawn misery of constant anxiety. But, if Samson went and came back with some conception of cherishing his wife—yes, the effort was worth making. Yet, as the girl came down the slope, gaily singing a very melancholy song, the painter broke off in his reflections, and his thoughts veered. If Samson left, would he ever return? Might not the old man after all be right? When he had seen other women and tasted other allurements would he, like Ulysses, still hold his barren Ithaca above the gilded invitation of Calypso? History has only one Ulysses.

Sally's voice was lilting like a bird's as she walked happily. The song was one of those old ballads that have been held intact since the stock learned to sing them in the heather of the Scotch highlands before there was an America.

"'She's pizened me, mother, make my bed soon,
Fer I'm sick at my heart and I fain would lay doon.'"

The man rose and went to meet her.

"Miss Sally," he began, uncertainly, "I want to talk to you."

She was always very grave and diffident with Lescott. He was a strange new type to her, and, though she had begun with a predilection in his favor, she had since then come to hold him in adverse prejudice. Before his arrival, Samson had been all hers. She had not missed in her lover the gallantries that she and her women had never known. At evening, when the supper dishes were washed and she sat in the honeysuckle fragrance of the young night with the whippoorwills calling, she had been accustomed to hear a particular whippoorwill-note call, much like the real ones, yet distinct to her waiting ears. She was wont to rise and go to the stile to meet him. She had known that every day she would, seemingly by chance, meet Samson somewhere along the creek, or on the big bowlder at the rift, or hoeing on the sloping cornfield. These things had been enough. But, of late, his interests had been divided. This painter had claimed many of his hours and many of his thoughts. There was in her heart an unconfessed jealousy of the foreigner. Now, she scrutinized him solemnly, and nodded.

"Won't you sit down?" he invited, and the girl dropped cross-legged on a mossy rock, and waited. To-day, she wore a blue print dress, instead of the red one. It was always a matter of amazement to the man that in such an environment she was not only wildly beautiful, but invariably the pink of neatness. She could climb a tree or a mountain, or emerge from a sweltering blackberry patch, seemingly as fresh and unruffled as she had been at the start. The man stood uncomfortably looking at her, and was momentarily at a loss for words with which to commence.

"What was ye a-goin' ter tell me?" she asked.

"Miss Sally," he began, "I've discovered something about Samson."

Her blue eyes flashed ominously.

"Ye can't tell me nothin' 'bout Samson," she declared, "withouten hit's somethin' nice."

"It's something very nice," the man reassured her.

"Then, ye needn't tell me, because I already knows hit," came her prompt and confident announcement.

Lescott shook his head, dubiously.

"Samson is a genius," he said.

"What's thet?"

"He has great gifts—great abilities to become a figure in the world."

She nodded her head, in prompt and full corroboration.

"I reckon Samson'll be the biggest man in the mountings some day."

"He ought to be more than that."

Suspicion at once cast a cloud across the violet serenity of her eyes.

"What does ye mean?" she demanded.

"I mean"—the painter paused a moment, and then said bluntly—"I mean that I want to take him back with me to New York."

The girl sprang to her feet with her chin defiantly high and her brown hands clenched into tight little fists. Her bosom heaved convulsively, and her eyes blazed through tears of anger. Her face was pale.

"Ye hain't!" she cried, in a paroxysm of fear and wrath. "Ye hain't a-goin' ter do no sich—no sich of a damn thing!" She stamped her foot, and her whole girlish body, drawn into rigid uprightness, was a-quiver with the incarnate spirit of the woman defending her home and institutions. For a moment after that, she could not speak, but her determined eyes blazed a declaration of war. It was as though he had posed her as the Spirit of the Cumberlands.

He waited until she should be calmer. It was useless to attempt stemming her momentary torrent of rage. It was like one of the sudden and magnificent tempests that often swept these hills, a brief visit of the furies. One must seek shelter and wait. It would end as suddenly as it had come. At last, he spoke, very softly.

"You don't understand me, Miss Sally. I'm not trying to take Samson away from you. If a man should lose a girl like you, he couldn't gain enough in the world to make up for it. All I want is that he shall have the chance to make the best of his life."

"I reckon Samson don't need no fotched-on help ter make folks acknowledge him."

"Every man needs his chance. He can be a great painter—but that's the least part of it. He can come back equipped for anything that life offers. Here, he is wasted."

"Ye mean"—she put the question with a hurt quaver in her voice—"ye mean we all hain't good enough fer Samson?"

"No. I only mean that Samson wants to grow—and he needs space and new scenes in which to grow. I want to take him where he can see more of the world—not only a little section of the world. Surely, you are not distrustful of Samson's loyalty? I want him to go with me for a while, and see life."

"Don't ye say hit!" The defiance in her voice was being pathetically tangled up with the tears. She was speaking in a transport of grief. "Don't ye say hit.

Take anybody else—take 'em all down thar, but leave us Samson. We needs him hyar. We've jest got ter have Samson hyar."

She faced him still with quivering lips, but in another moment, with a sudden sob, she dropped to the rock, and buried her face in her crossed arms. Her slender body shook under a harrowing convulsion of unhappiness. Lescott felt as though he had struck her; as though he had ruthlessly blighted the irresponsible joyousness which had a few minutes before sung from her lips with the blitheness of a mocking-bird. He went over and softly laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Miss Sally—" he began.

She suddenly turned on him a tear-stained, infuriated face, stormy with blazing eyes and wet cheeks and trembling lips.

"Don't touch me," she cried; "don't ye dare ter touch me! I hain't nothin' but a gal—but I reckon I could 'most tear ye ter pieces. Ye're jest a pizen snake, anyhow!" Then, she pointed a tremulous finger off up the road. "Git away from hyar," she commanded. "I don't never want ter see ye again. Ye're tryin' ter steal everything I loves. Git away, I tells ye!—git away—begone!"

"Think it over," urged Lescott, quietly. "See if your heart doesn't say I am Samson's friend—and yours." He turned, and began making his way over the rocks; but, before he had gone far, he sat down to reflect upon the situation. Certainly, he was not augmenting his popularity. A half-hour later, he heard a rustle, and, turning, saw Sally standing not far off. She was hesitating at the edge of the underbrush, and Lescott read in her eyes the effort it was costing her to come forward and apologize. Her cheeks were still pale and her eyes wet, but the tempest of her anger had spent itself, and in the girl who stood penitently, one hand nervously clutching a branch of rhododendron, one foot twisting in the moss, Lescott was seeing an altogether new Sally. There was a renunciation in her eyes that in contrast with the child-like curve of her lips, and slim girlishness of her figure, seemed entirely pathetic.

As she stood there, trying to come forward with a pitiful effort at composure and a twisted smile, Lescott wanted to go and meet her. But he knew her shyness, and realized that the kindest thing would be to pretend that he had not seen her at all. So, he covertly watched her, while he assumed to sit in moody unconsciousness of her nearness.

Little by little, and step by step, she edged over to him, halting often and looking about with the impulse to slip out of sight, but always bracing herself and drawing a little nearer. Finally, he knew that she was standing almost directly over him, and yet it was a moment or two more before her voice, sweetly penitent, announced her arrival.

"I reckon—I reckon I've got ter ask yore pardon," she said, slowly and with labored utterance. He looked up to see her standing with her head drooping and her fingers nervously pulling a flower to pieces.

"I reckon I hain't a plumb fool. I knows thet Samson's got a right ter eddication. Anyhow, I knows he wants hit."

"Education," said the man, "isn't going to change

Samson, except to make him finer than he is—and more capable."

She shook her head. "I hain't got no eddication," she answered. "Hit's a-goin' ter make him too good fer me. I reckon hit's a-goin' ter jest about kill me. . . . Ye hain't never seed these here mountings in the winter time, when thar hain't nothin' green, an' thar hain't no birds a-singin', an' thar hain't nothin' but rain an' snow an' fog an' misery. They're a-goin' ter be like thet all the time fer me, atter Samson's gone away." She choked back something like a sob before she went on. "Yes, stranger, hit's a-goin' ter pretty nigh kill me, but—" Her lips twisted themselves into the pathetic smile again, and her chin came stiffly up. "But," she added, determinedly, "thet don't make no diff'rence, nohow."

CHAPTER X

YET, when Samson that evening gave his whippoorwill call at the Widow Miller's cabin, he found a dejected and miserable girl sitting on the stile, with her chin propped in her two hands and her eyes full of somberness and foreboding.

"What's the matter, Sally?" questioned he, anxiously. "Hes that low-down Tamarack Spicer been round here tellin' ye some more stories ter pester ye?"

She shook her head in silence. Usually, she bore the brunt of their conversations, Samson merely agreeing with, or overruling, her in lordly brevities. The boy climbed up and sat beside her.

"Thar's a-goin' ter be a dancin' party over ter Wile McCager's mill come Saturday," he insinuatingly suggested. "I reckon ye'll go over thar with me, won't ye, Sally?"

He waited for her usual delighted assent, but Sally only told him absently and without enthusiasm that she would "study about it." At last, however, her restraint broke, and, looking up, she abruptly demanded:

"Air ye a-goin' away, Samson?"

"Who's been a-talkin' ter ye?" demanded the boy, angrily.

For a moment, the girl sat silent. Silver mists were softening under a rising moon. The katydids were prophesying with strident music the six weeks' warning of frost. Myriads of stars were soft and low-hanging. Finally, she spoke in a grave voice:

"Hit hain't nothin' ter git mad about, Samson. The artist man 'lowed as how ye had a right ter go down thar, an' git an eddication." She made a weary gesture toward the great beyond.

"He hadn't ought to of told ye, Sally. If I'd been plumb sartin in my mind, I'd a-told ye myself—not but what I knows," he hastily amended, "thet he meant hit friendly."

"Air ye a-goin'?"

"I'm studyin' about hit."

He awaited objection, but none came. Then, with a piquing of his masculine vanity, he demanded:

"Hain't ye a-keerin', Sally, whether I goes, or not?"

The girl grew rigid. Her fingers on the crumbling plank of the stile's top tightened and gripped hard. The moonlit landscape seemed to whirl in a dizzy circle. Her face did not betray her, nor her voice, though she had to gulp down a rising lump in her throat before she could answer calmly.

"I thinks ye had ought ter go, Samson."

The boy was astonished. He had avoided the subject for fear of her opposition—and tears.

Then, slowly, she went on as though repeating a lesson painstakingly conned:

"There hain't nothin' in these here hills fer ye, Samson. Down thar, ye'll see lots of things thet's new—an' civilized an' beautiful! Ye'll see lots of gals thet kin read an' write, gals dressed up in all kinds of fancy fixin's." Her glib words ran out and ended in a sort of inward gasp.

Compliment came hardly and awkwardly to Samson's lips. He reached for the girl's hand, and whispered:

"I reckon I won't see no gals thet's as purty as you be, Sally. I reckon ye knows, whether I goes or stays, we're a-goin' ter git married."

She drew her hand away, and laughed, a little bitterly. In the last day, she had ceased to be a child, and become a woman with all the soul-aching possibilities of a woman's intuitions.

"Samson," she said, "I hain't askin' ye ter make me no promises. When ye sees them other gals—gals thet kin read an' write—I reckon mebby ye'll think diff'rent. I can't hardly spell out printin' in the fust reader."

Her lover's voice was scornful of the imagined dangers, as a recruit may be of the battle terrors—before he has been under fire. He slipped his arm about her and drew her over to him.

"Honey," he said, "ye needn't fret about thet. Readin' an' writin' can't make no difference fer a woman. Hit's mighty important fer a man, but you're a gal."

"You're a-goin' ter think diff'rent atter awhile," she insisted. "When ye goes, I hain't a-goin' ter be expectin' ye ter come back . . . But"—the resolution in her voice for a moment quavered as she added—"but God knows I'm a-goin' ter be hopin'!"

"Sally!" The boy rose, and paced up and down in the road. "Air ye goin' ter be ag'inst me, too? Don't ye see that I wants ter have a chanst? Can't ye trust me? I'm jest a-tryin' to amount to something. I'm plumb tired of bein' ornery an' no 'count."

She nodded.

"I've done told ye," she said, wearily, "thet I thinks ye ought ter do hit."

He stood there in the road looking down at her and the twisted smile that lifted only one corner of her lips, while the other drooped. The moonlight caught her eyes; eyes that were trying, like the lips, to smile, but that were really looking away into the future, which she saw stripped of companionship and love, and gray with the ashiness of wretched desolation. And, while he was seeing the light of the simulated cheeriness die out in her face, she was seeing the strange, exalted glow, of which she was more than half-afraid, kindle in his pupils. It was as though she were giving up the living fire out of her own heart to set ablaze the ambition and anticipation in his own.

That glow in Samson's eyes she feared and shrank from, as she might have flinched before the blaze of insanity. It was a thing which her mountain superstition could not understand, a thing not wholly normal; a manifestation that came to the stoic face and transformed it, when the eyes of the brain and heart were seeing things which she herself could not see. It was the proclamation of the part of Samson which she could not comprehend, as though he were looking into a spirit world of weird and abnormal things. It was the light of an enthusiasm such as his love for her could not bring to his eyes—and it told her that the strongest and deepest part of Samson did not belong to her. Now, as the young man stood there before her, and her little world of hope and happiness seemed crumbling into ruins, and she was steeling her soul to sacrifice herself and let him go, he was thinking, not of what it was costing her in heart-break, but seeing visions of all the great world held for him beyond the barriers of the mountains. The light in his eyes seemed to flaunt the victory of the enthusiasms that had nothing to do with her.

Samson came forward, and held out his arms. But Sally drew away with a little shudder, and crouched at the end of the stile.

"What's ther matter, Sally?" he demanded in surprise, and, as he bent toward her, his eyes lost the strange light she feared, and she laughed a little nervous laugh, and rose from her seat.

"Nothin' hain't ther matter—now," she said, stanchly.

Lescott and Samson discussed the matter frequently. At times, the boy was obstinate in his determination to remain; at other times, he gave way to the yearnings for change and opportunity. But the lure of the palette and brush possessed him beyond resistance and his taciturnity melted, when in the painter's company, to a roughly poetic form of expression.

"Thet sunrise," he announced one morning, setting down his milk-pail to gaze at the east, "is jest like the sparkle in a gal's eyes when she's tickled at somethin' ye've said about her. An,' when the sun sets, hit's like the whole world was a woman blushin'."

The dance on Saturday was to be something more portentous than a mere frolic. It would be a clan gathering to which the South adherents would come riding up and down Misery and its tributaries from "nigh abouts" and "over yon." From forenoon until after midnight, shuffle, jig and fiddling would hold high, if rough, carnival. But, while the younger folk abandoned themselves to these diversions, the grayer heads would gather in more serious conclave. Jesse Purvy had once more beaten back death, and his mind had probably been devising, during those bed-ridden days and nights, plans of reprisal. According to current report, Purvy had announced that his would-be assassin dwelt on Misery, and was "marked down." So, there were obvious exigencies which the Souths must prepare to meet. In particular, the clan must thrash out to definite understanding the demoralizing report that Samson South, their logical leader, meant to abandon them, at a crisis when war-clouds were thickening.

The painter had finally resolved to cut the Gordian knot, and leave the mountains. He had trained on Samson to the last piece all his artillery of argument. The case was now submitted with the suggestion that the boy take three months to consider, and that, if he decided affirmatively, he should notify Lescott in advance of his coming. He proposed sending Samson a small library of carefully picked books, which the mountaineer eagerly agreed to devour in the interval.

Lescott consented, however, to remain over Saturday, and go to the dance, since he was curious to observe what pressure was brought to bear on the boy, and to have himself a final word of argument after the kinsmen had spoken.

Saturday morning came after a night of torrential rain, which had left the mountains steaming under a reek of fog and pitching clouds. Hillside streams ran freshets, and creek-bed roads were foaming and boiling into waterfalls. Sheep and cattle huddled forlornly under their shelters of shelving rock, and only the geese seemed happy.

Far down the dripping shoulders of the mountains trailed ragged streamers of vapor. Here and there along the lower slopes hung puffs of smoky mist as though silent shells were bursting from unseen artillery over a vast theater of combat.

But, as the morning wore on, the sun fought its way to view in a scrap of overhead blue. A freshening breeze plunged into the reek, and sent it scurrying in broken cloud ranks and shredded tatters. The steamy heat gave way under a dissipating sweep of coolness, until the skies smiled down on the hills and the hills smiled back. From log cabins and plank houses up and down Misery and its tributaries, men and women began their hegira toward the mill. Some came on foot, carrying their shoes in their hands, but those were only near-by dwellers. Others made saddle journeys of ten or fifteen, or even twenty, miles, and the beasts that carried a single burden were few. Lescott rode in the wake of Samson, who had Sally on a pillow at his back, and along the seven miles of journey he studied the strange procession. It was, for the most part, a solemn cavalcade, for these are folk who "take their pleasures sadly." Possibly, some of the sun-bonneted, strangely-garbed women were reflecting on the possibilities which mountain-dances often develop into tragic actualities. Possibly, others were having their enjoyment discounted by the necessity of "dressing up" and wearing shoes.

Sometimes, a slowly ambling mule bore an entire family; the father managing the reins with one hand and holding a baby with the other, while his rifle lay balanced across his pommel and his wife sat solemnly behind him on a sheepskin or pillion. Many of the men rode side-saddles, and sacks bulky at each end hinted of such baggage as is carried in jugs. Lescott realized from the frank curiosity with which he was regarded that he had been a topic of discussion, and that he was now being "sized up." He was the false prophet who was weaving a spell over Samson! Once, he heard a sneering voice from the wayside comment as he rode by.

"He looks like a damned parson."

Glancing back, he saw a tow-headed youth glowering at him out of pinkish albino eyes. The way lay in part along the creek-bed, where wagons had ground the disintegrating rock into deep ruts as smooth as walls of concrete. Then, it traversed a country of palisading cliffs and immensity of forest, park-like and splendid. Strangely picturesque suspension bridges with rough stairways at their ends spanned waters too deep for fording. Frame houses showed along the banks of the creek—grown here to a river—unplaned and unpainted of wall, but brightly touched with window- and door-frames of bright yellow or green or blue. This was the territory where the Souths held dominance, and it was pouring out its people.

They came before noon to the mouth of Dryhole Creek, and the house of Wile McCager. Already, the picket fence was lined with tethered horses and mules, and a canvas-covered wagon came creeping in behind its yoke of oxen. Men stood clustered in the road, and at the entrance a woman, nursing her baby at her breast, welcomed and gossiped with the arrivals.

The house of Wile McCager loaned itself to entertainment. It was not of logs, but of undressed lumber, and boasted a front porch and two front rooms entered by twin doors facing on a triangular alcove. In the recess between these portals stood a washstand, surmounted by a china basin and pitcher—a declaration of affluence. From the interior of the house came the sounds of fiddling, though these strains of "Turkey in the Straw" were only by way of prelude. Lescott felt, though he could not say just what concrete thing told him, that under the shallow note of merry-making brooded the major theme of a troublesome problem. The seriousness was below the surface, but insistently depressing. He saw, too, that he himself was mixed up with it in a fashion, which might become dangerous, when a few jugs of white liquor had been emptied.

It would be some time yet before the crowd warmed up. Now, they only stood about and talked, and to Lescott they gave a gravely polite greeting, beneath which was discernible an undercurrent of hostility.

As the day advanced, the painter began picking out the more influential clansmen, by the fashion in which they fell together into groups, and took themselves off to the mill by the racing creek for discussion. While the young persons danced and "sparked" within, and the more truculent lads escaped to the road to pass the jug, and forecast with youthful war-fever "cleanin' out the Hollmans," the elders were deep in ways and means. If the truce could be preserved for its unexpired period of three years, it was, of course, best. In that event, crops could be cultivated, and lives saved. But, if Jesse Purvy chose to regard his shooting as a breach of terms, and struck, he would strike hard, and, in that event, best defense lay in striking first. Samson would soon be twenty-one. That he would take his place as head of the clan had until now never been questioned—and he was talking of desertion. For that, a pink-skinned foreigner, who wore a woman's bow of ribbon at his collar, was to blame. The question of loyalty must be squarely put up to Samson, and it must be done to-day. His answer must be definite and unequivocal. As a guest of Spicer South, Lescott was entitled to that consideration which is accorded ambassadors.

None the less, the vital affairs of the clan could not be balked by consideration for a stranger, who, in the opinion of the majority, should be driven from the country as an insidious mischief-maker. Ostensibly, the truce still held, but at no time since its signing had matters been so freighted with the menace of a gathering storm. The attitude of each faction was that of several men standing quiet with guns trained on one another's breasts. Each hesitated to fire, knowing that to pull the trigger meant to die himself, yet fearing that another trigger might at any moment be drawn. Purvy dared not have Samson shot out of hand, because he feared that the Souths would claim his life in return, yet he feared to let Samson live. On the other hand, if Purvy fell, no South could balance his death, except Spicer or Samson. Any situation that might put conditions to a moment of issue would either prove that the truce was being observed, or open the war—and yet each faction was guarding against such an event as too fraught with danger. One thing was certain. By persuasion or force, Lescott must leave, and Samson must show himself to be the youth he had been thought, or the confessed and repudiated renegade. Those questions, to-day must answer. It was a difficult situation, and promised an eventful entertainment. Whatever conclusion was reached as to the artist's future, he was, until the verdict came in, a visitor, and, unless liquor inflamed some reckless trouble-hunter, that fact would not be forgotten. Possibly, it was as well that Tamarack Spicer had not arrived.

Lescott himself realized the situation in part, as he stood at the door of the house watching the scene inside.

There was, of course, no round dancing—only the shuffle and jig—with champions contending for the honor of their sections. A young woman from Deer Lick and a girl from the head of Dryhill had been matched for the "hoe-down," and had the floor to themselves. The walls were crowded with partisan onlookers, who applauded and cheered their favorite.

The bows scraped faster and louder; the clapping hands beat more tumultuously, until their mad *tempo* was like the clatter of musketry; the dancers threw themselves deliriously into the madly quickening step. It was a riotous saturnalia of flying feet and twinkling ankles. Onlookers shouted and screamed encouragement. It seemed that the girls must fall in exhaustion, yet each kept on, resolved to be still on the floor when the other had abandoned it in defeat—that being the test of victory. At last, the girl from Dryhill reeled, and was caught by half-a-dozen arms. Her adversary, holding the floor undisputed, slowed down, and someone stopped the fiddler. Sally turned from the crowded wall, and began looking about for Samson. He was not there. Lescott had seen him leave the house a few moments before, and started over to intercept the girl, as she came out to the porch.

In the group about the door, he passed a youth with tow-white hair and very pink cheeks. The boy was the earliest to succumb to the temptation of the moonshine jug, a temptation which would later claim others. He was reeling crazily, and his albino eyes were now red and inflamed. Lescott remembered him.

"Thet's ther damned furriner thet's done turned Samson inter a gal," proclaimed the youth, in a thick voice.

The painter paused, and looked back. The boy was reaching under his coat with hands that had become clumsy and unresponsive.

"Let me git at him," he shouted, with a wild whoop and a dash toward the painter.

Lescott said nothing, but Sally had heard, and stepped swiftly between.

"You've got ter git past me fust, Buddy," she said, quietly. "I reckon ye'd better run on home, an' git yore mammy ter put ye ter bed."

CHAPTER XI

SEVERAL soberer men closed around the boy, and, after disarming him, led him away grumbling and muttering, while Wile McCager made apologies to the guest.

"Jimmy's jest a peevish child," he explained. "A drop or two of licker makes him skittish. I hopes ye'll look over hit."

Jimmy's outbreak was interesting to Lescott chiefly as an indication of what might follow. He noted how the voices were growing louder and shriller, and how the jug was circulating faster. A boisterous note was making itself heard through the good humor and laughter, and the "furriner" remembered that these minds, when inflamed, are more prone to take the tangent of violence than that of mirth. Unwilling to introduce discord by his presence, and involve Samson in quarrels on his account, he suggested riding back to Misery, but the boy's face clouded at the suggestion.

"Ef they kain't be civil ter my friends," he said, shortly, "they've got ter account ter me. You stay right hyar, and I'll stay clost to you. I done come hyar to-day ter tell 'em that they mustn't meddle in my business."

A short while later, Wile McCager invited Samson to come out to the mill, and the boy nodded to Lescott an invitation to accompany him. The host shook his head.

"We kinder 'lowed ter talk over some fam'ly matters with ye, Samson," he demurred. "I reckon Mr. Lescott'll excuse ye fer a spell."

"Anything ye've got ter talk ter me about, George Lescott kin hear," said the youth, defiantly. "I hain't got no secrets." He was heir to his father's leadership, and his father had been unquestioned. He meant to stand uncompromisingly on his prerogatives.

For an instant, the old miller's keen eyes hardened obstinately. After Spicer and Samson South, he was the most influential and trusted of the South leaders—and Samson was still a boy. His ruggedly chiseled features were kindly, but robustly resolute, and, when he was angered, few men cared to face him. For an instant, a stinging rebuke seemed to hover on his lips, then he turned with a curt jerk of his large head.

"All right. Suit yourselves. I've done warned ye both. We 'lows ter talk plain."

The mill, dating back to pioneer days, sat by its race with its shaft now idle. About it, the white-boled sycamores crowded among the huge rocks, and the water poured tumultuously over the dam. The walls of mortised logs were chinked with rock and clay. At its porch, two discarded millstones served in lieu of steps. Over the door were fastened a spreading pair of stag-antlers. It looked to Lescott, as he approached, like a scrap of landscape torn from some medieval picture, and the men about its door seemed medieval, too; bearded and gaunt, hard-thewed and sullen.

All of them who stood waiting were men of middle age, or beyond. A number were gray-haired, but they were all of cadet branches. Many of them, like Wile

McCager himself, did not bear the name of South, and Samson was the eldest son of the eldest son. They sat on meal-whitened bins and dusty timbers and piled-up sacks. Several crouched on the ground, squatting on their heels, and, as the conference proceeded, they drank moonshine whiskey, and spat solemnly at the floor cracks.

"Hevn't ye noticed a right-smart change in Samson?" inquired old Caleb Wiley of a neighbor, in his octogenarian quaver. "The boy hes done got es quiet an' pious es a missionary."

The other nodded under his battered black felt hat, and beat a tattoo with the end of his long hickory staff.

"He hain't drunk a half-pint of licker to-day," he querulously replied.

"Why in heck don't we run this here pink-faced conjure-doctor outen the mountings?" demanded Caleb, who had drunk more than a half-pint. "He's a-castin' spells over the boy. He's a-practisin' of deviltries."

"We're a-goin' ter see about thet right now," was the response. "We don't 'low to let hit run on no further."

"Samson," began old Wile McCager, clearing his throat and taking up his duty as spokesman, "we're all your kinfolks here, an' we aimed ter ask ye about this here report thet yer 'lowin' ter leave the mountings?"

"What of hit?" countered the boy.

"Hit looks mighty like the war's a-goin' ter be on ag'in pretty soon. Air ye a-goin' ter quit, or air ye a-goin' ter stick? Thet's what we wants ter know."

"I didn't make this here truce, an' I hain't a-goin' ter bust hit," said the boy, quietly. "When the war commences, I'll be hyar. Ef I hain't hyar in the meantime, hit hain't nobody's business. I hain't accountable ter no man but my pap, an' I reckon, whar he is, he knows whether I'm a-goin' ter keep my word."

There was a moment's silence, then Wile McCager put another question:

"Ef ye're plumb sot on gittin' larnin' why don't ye git hit right hyar in these mountings?"

Samson laughed derisively.

"Who'll I git hit from?" he caustically inquired. "Ef the mountain won't come ter Mohamet, Mohamet's got ter go ter the mountain, I reckon." The figure was one they did not understand. It was one Samson himself had only acquired of late. He was quoting George Lescott. But one thing there was which did not escape his hearers: the tone of contempt. Eyes of smoldering hate turned on the visitor at whose door they laid the blame.

Caleb Wiley rose unsteadily to his feet, his shaggy beard trembling with wrath and his voice quavering with senile indignation.

"Hev ye done got too damned good fer yore kinfolks, Samson South?" he shrilly demanded. "Hev ye done been follerin' atter this here puny witch-doctor twell ye can't keep a civil tongue in yer head fer yore elders? I'm in favor of runnin' this here furriner outen the country with tar an' feathers on him. Furthermore, I'm in favor of cleanin' out the Hollmans. I was jest a-sayin' ter Bill——"

"Never mind what ye war jest a-sayin'," interrupted the boy, flushing redly to his cheekbones, but controlling his voice. "Ye've done said enough a'ready. Ye're a right old man, Caleb, an' I reckon thet gives ye some license ter shoot off yore face, but ef any of them no-'count, shif'less boys of yores wants ter back up what ye says, I'm ready ter go out thar an' make 'em eat hit. I hain't a-goin' ter answer no more questions."

There was a commotion of argument, until "Black Dave" Jasper, a saturnine giant, whose hair was no blacker than his expression, rose, and a semblance of quiet greeted him as he spoke.

"Mebby, Samson, ye've got a right ter take the studs this a-way, an' ter refuse ter answer our questions, but we've got a right ter say who kin stay in this hyar country. Ef ye 'lows ter quit us, I reckon we kin quit you—and, if we quits ye, ye hain't nothin' more ter us then no other boy thet's gettin' too big fer his breeches. This furriner is a visitor here to-day, an' we don't 'low ter hurt him—but he's got ter go. We don't want him round hyar no longer." He turned to Lescott. "We're a-givin' ye fair warnin', stranger. Ye hain't our breed. Atter this, ye stays on Misery at yore own risk—an' hit's a-goin' ter be plumb risky. That thar's final."

"This man," blazed the boy, before Lescott could speak, "is a-visitin' me an' Unc' Spicer. When ye wants him ye kin come up thar an' git him. Every damned man of ye kin come. I hain't a-sayin' how many of ye'll go back. He was 'lowin' that he'd leave hyar termorrer mornin', but atter this I'm a-tellin' ye he hain't a-goin' ter do hit. He's a-goin' ter stay es long es he likes, an' nobody hain't a-goin' ter run him off." Samson took his stand before the painter, and swept the group with his eyes. "An' what's more," he added, "I'll tell ye another thing. I hadn't plumb made up my mind ter leave the mountings, but ye've done settled hit fer me. I'm a-goin'."

There was a low murmur of anger, and a voice cried out from the rear:

"Let him go. We hain't got no use fer damn cowards."

"Whoever said thet's a liar!" shouted the boy. Lescott, standing at his side, felt that the situation was more than parlous. But, before the storm could break, some one rushed in, and whispered to Wile McCager a message that caused him to raise both hands above his head, and thunder for attention.

"Men," he roared, "listen ter me! This here hain't no time fer squabblin' amongst ourselves. We're all Souths. Tamarack Spicer has done gone ter Hixon, an' got inter trouble. He's locked up in the jail-house."

"We're all hyar," screamed old Caleb's high, broken voice. "Let's go an' take him out."

Samson's anger had died. He turned, and held a whispered conversation with McCager, and, at its end, the host of the day announced briefly:

"Samson's got somethin' ter say ter ye. So long as he's willin' ter stand by us, I reckon we're willin' ter listen ter Henry South's boy."

"I hain't got no use for Tam'rack Spicer," said the boy, succinctly, "but I don't 'low ter let him lay in no jail-house, unlessen he's got a right ter be thar. What's he charged with?"

But no one knew that. A man supposedly close to the Hollmans, but in reality an informer for the Souths, had seen him led into the jail-yard by a posse of a half-dozen men, and had seen the iron-barred doors close on him. That was all, except that the Hollman forces were gathering in Hixon, and, if the Souths went there *en masse,* a pitched battle must be the inevitable result. The first step was to gain accurate information and an answer to one vital question. Was Tamarack held as a feud victim, or was his arrest legitimate? How to learn that was the problem. To send a body of men was to invite bloodshed. To send a single inquirer was to deliver him over to the enemy.

"Air you men willin' ter take my word about Tamarack?" inquired Samson. But for the scene of a few minutes ago, it would have been an unnecessary question. There was a clamorous assent, and the boy turned to Lescott.

"I wants ye ter take Sally home with ye. Ye'd better start right away, afore she heers any of this talk. Hit would fret her. Tell her I've had ter go 'cross ther country a piece, ter see a sick man. Don't tell her whar I'm a-goin'." He turned to the others. "I reckon I've got yore promise thet Mr. Lescott hain't a-goin' ter be bothered afore I gits back?"

Wile McCager promptly gave the assurance.

"I gives ye my hand on hit."

"I seed Jim Asberry loafin' round jest beyond ther ridge, es I rid over hyar," volunteered the man who had brought the message.

"Go slow now, Samson. Don't be no blame fool," dissuaded Wile McCager. "Hixon's plumb full of them Hollmans, an' they're likely ter be full of licker—hit's Saturday. Hit's apt ter be shore death fer ye ter try ter ride through Main Street—ef ye gits thet fur. Ye dassent do hit."

"I dast do anything!" asserted the boy, with a flash of sudden anger. "Some liar 'lowed awhile ago thet I was a coward. All right, mebby I be. Unc' Wile, keep the boys hyar tell ye hears from me—an' keep 'em sober." He turned and made his way to the fence where his mule stood hitched.

When Samson crossed the ridge, and entered the Hollman country, Jim Asberry, watching from a hilltop point of vantage, rose and mounted the horse that stood hitched behind a near-by screen of rhododendron bushes and young cedars. Sometimes, he rode just one bend of the road in Samson's rear. Sometimes, he took short cuts, and watched his enemy pass. But always he held him under a vigilant eye. Finally, he reached a wayside store where a local telephone gave communication with Hollman's Mammoth Department Store.

"Jedge," he informed, "Samson South's done left the party et ther mill, an' he's a-ridin' towards town. Shall I git him?"

"Is he comin' by hisself?" inquired the storekeeper.

"Yes."

"Well, jest let him come on. We can tend ter him hyar, ef necessary." So, Jim withheld his hand, and merely shadowed, sending bulletins, from time to time.

It was three o'clock when Samson started. It was near six when he reached the ribbon of road that loops down into town over the mountain. His mule was in a lather of sweat. He knew that he was being spied upon, and that word of his coming was traveling ahead of him. What he did not know was whether or not it suited Jesse Purvy's purpose that he should slide from his mule, dead, before he turned homeward. If Tamarack had been seized as a declaration of war, the chief South would certainly not be allowed to return. If the arrest had not been for feud reasons, he might escape. That was the question which would be answered with his life or death.

The boy kept his eyes straight to the front, fixed on the philosophical wagging of his mule's brown ears. Finally, he crossed the bridge that gave entrance to the town, as yet unharmed, and clattered at a trot between the shacks of the environs. He was entering the fortified stronghold of the enemy, and he was expected. As he rode along, doors closed to slits, and once or twice he caught the flash of sunlight on a steel barrel, but his eyes held to the front. Several traveling men, sitting on the porch of the hotel opposite the court-house, rose when they saw his mule, and went inside, closing the door behind them.

The "jail-house" was a small building of home-made brick, squatting at the rear of the court-house yard. Its barred windows were narrow with sills breast-high.

The court-house itself was shaded by large oaks and sycamores, and, as Samson drew near, he saw that some ten or twelve men, armed with rifles, separated from groups and disposed themselves behind the tree trunks and the stone coping of the well. None of them spoke, and Samson pretended that he had not seen them. He rode his mule at a walk, knowing that he was rifle-covered from a half-dozen windows. At the hitching rack directly beneath the county building, he flung his reins over a post, and, swinging his rifle at his side, passed casually along the brick walk to the jail. The men behind the trees edged around their covers as he went, keeping themselves protected, as squirrels creep around a trunk when a hunter is lurking below. Samson halted at the jail wall, and called the prisoner's name. A towsled head and surly face appeared at the barred window, and the boy went over and held converse from the outside.

"How in hell did ye git into town?" demanded the prisoner.

"I rid in," was the short reply. "How'd ye git in the jail-house?"

The captive was shamefaced.

"I got a leetle too much licker, an' I was shootin' out the lights last night," he confessed.

"What business did ye have hyar in Hixon?"

"I jest slipped in ter see a gal."

Samson leaned closer, and lowered his voice.

"Does they know thet ye shot them shoots at Jesse Purvy?"

Tamarack turned pale.

"No," he stammered, "they believe you done hit."

Samson laughed. He was thinking of the rifles trained on him from a dozen invisible rests.

"How long air they a-goin' ter keep ye hyar?" he demanded.

"I kin git out to-morrer ef I pays the fine. Hit's ten dollars."

"An' ef ye don't pay the fine?"

"Hit's a dollar a day."

"I reckon ye don't 'low ter pay hit, do ye?"

"I 'lowed mebby ye mout pay hit fer me, Samson."

"Ye done 'lowed plumb wrong. I come hyar ter see ef ye needed help, but hit 'pears ter me they're lettin' ye off easy."

He turned on his heel, and went back to his mule. The men behind the trees began circling again. Samson mounted, and, with his chin well up, trotted back along the main street. It was over. The question was answered. The Hollmans regarded the truce as still effective. The fact that they were permitting him to ride out alive was a wordless assurance of that. Incidentally, he stood vindicated in the eyes of his own people.

When Samson reached the mill it was ten o'clock. The men were soberer than they had been in the afternoon. McCager had seen to that. The boy replaced his exhausted mule with a borrowed mount. At midnight, as he drew near the cabin of the Widow Miller, he gave a long, low whippoorwill call, and promptly, from the shadow of the stile, a small tired figure rose up to greet him. For hours that little figure had been sitting there, silent, wide-eyed and terrified, nursing her knees in locked fingers that pressed tightly into the flesh. She had not spoken. She had hardly moved. She had only gazed out, keeping the vigil with a white face that was beginning to wear the drawn, heart-eating anxiety of the mountain woman; the woman whose code demands that she stand loyally to her clan's hatreds; the woman who has none of the man's excitement in stalking human game, which is also stalking him; the woman who must only stay at home and imagine a thousand terrors—and wait.

A rooster was crowing, and the moon had set. Only the stars were left.

"Sally," the boy reproved, "hit's most mornin', an' ye must be plumb fagged out. Why hain't you in bed?"

"I 'lowed ye'd come by hyar," she told him simply, "and I waited fer ye. I knowed whar ye had went," she added, "an' I was skeered."

"How did ye know?"

"I heered thet Tam'rack was in the jail-house, an' somebody hed ter go ter Hixon. So, of course, I knowed hit would be you."

CHAPTER XII

LESCOTT stayed on a week after that simply in deference to Samson's insistence. To leave at once might savor of flight under fire, but when the week was out the painter turned his horse's head toward town, and his train swept him back to the Bluegrass and the East. As he gazed out of his car windows at great shoulders of rock and giant trees, things he was leaving behind, he felt a sudden twinge of something akin to homesickness. He knew that he should miss these great humps of mountains and the ragged grandeur of the scenery. With the rich smoothness of the Bluegrass, a sense of flatness and heaviness came to his lungs. Level metal roads and loamy fields invited his eye. The tobacco stalks rose in profuse heaviness of sticky green; the hemp waved its feathery tops; and woodlands were clear of underbrush—the pauper counties were behind him.

A quiet of unbroken and deadly routine settled down on Misery. The conduct of the Souths in keeping hands off, and acknowledging the justice of Tamarack Spicer's jail sentence, had been their answer to the declaration of the Hollmans in letting Samson ride into and out of Hixon. The truce was established. When, a short time later, Tamarack left the country to become a railroad brakeman, Jesse Purvy passed the word that his men must, until further orders, desist from violence.

The word had crept about that Samson, too, was going away, and, if this were true, Jesse felt that his future would be more secure than his past. Purvy believed Samson guilty, despite the exoneration of the hounds. Their use had been the idea of over-fervent relatives. He himself scoffed at their reliability.

"I wouldn't believe no dog on oath," he declared. Besides, he preferred to blame Samson, since he was the head of the tribe and because he himself knew what cause Samson had to hate him. Perhaps, even now, Samson meant to have vengeance before leaving. Possibly, even, this ostentatious care to regard the truce was simply a shrewdly planned sham meant to disarm his suspicion.

Until Samson went, if he did go, Jesse Purvy would redouble his caution. It would be a simple matter to have the boy shot to death, and end all question. Samson took no precautions to safeguard his life, but he had a safeguard none the less. Purvy felt sure that within a week after Samson fell, despite every care he might take, he, too, would fall. He was tired of being shot down. Purvy was growing old, and the fires of war were burning to embers in his veins. He was becoming more and more interested in other things. It dawned upon him that to be known as a friend of the poor held more allurement for gray-haired age than to be known as a master of assassins. It would be pleasant to sit undisturbed, and see his grandchildren grow up, and he recognized, with a sudden ferocity of repugnance, that he did not wish them to grow up as feud fighters. Purvy had not reformed, but, other things being equal, he would prefer to live and let live. He had reached that stage to which all successful villains come at some time, when he envied the placid contentment of respected virtues. Ordering Samson shot down was a last resort —one to be held in reserve until the end.

So, along Misery and Crippleshin, the men of the factions held their fire while the summer spent itself, and over the mountain slopes the leaves began to turn, and the mast to ripen.

Lescott had sent a box of books, and Samson had taken a team over to Hixon, and brought them back. It was a hard journey, attended with much plunging against the yokes and much straining of trace chains. Sally had gone with him. Samson was spending as much time as possible in her society now. The girl was saying little about his departure, but her eyes were reading, and without asking she knew that his going was inevitable. Many nights she cried herself to sleep, but, when he saw her, she was always the same blithe, bird-like creature that she had been before. She was philosophically sipping her honey while the sun shone.

Samson read some of the books aloud to Sally, who had a child's passion for stories, and who could not have spelled them out for herself. He read badly, but to her it was the flower of scholastic accomplishment, and her untrained brain, sponge-like in its acquisitiveness, soaked up many new words and phrases which fell again quaintly from her lips in talk. Lescott had spent a week picking out those books. He had wanted them to argue for him; to feed the boy's hunger for education, and give him some forecast of the life that awaited him. His choice had been an effort to achieve *multum in parvo*, but Samson devoured them all from title page to *finis* line, and many of them he went back to, and digested again.

He wrestled long and gently with his uncle, struggling to win the old man's consent to his departure. But Spicer South's brain was no longer plastic. What had been good enough for the past was good enough for the future. He sought to take the most tolerant view, and to believe that Samson was acting on conviction and not on an ingrate's impulse, but that was the best he could do, and he added to himself that Samson's was an abnormal and perverted conviction. Nevertheless, he arranged affairs so that his nephew should be able to meet financial needs, and to go where he chose in a fashion befitting a South. The old man was intensely proud, and, if the boy were bent on wasting himself, he should waste like a family head, and not appear a pauper among strangers.

The autumn came, and the hills blazed out in their fanfare of splendid color. The broken skyline took on a wistful sweetness under the haze of "the Great Spirit's peace-pipe."

The sugar trees flamed their fullest crimson that fall. The poplars were clear amber and the hickories russet and the oaks a deep burgundy. Lean hogs began to fill and fatten with their banqueting on beechnuts and acorns. Scattered quail came together in the conclave of the covey, and changed their summer call for the "hover" whistle. Shortly, the rains would strip the trees, and leave them naked. Then, Misery would vindicate its christener. But, now, as if to compensate in a few carnival days of champagne sparkle and color, the mountain world was burning out its summer life on a pyre of transient splendor.

November came in bleakly, with a raw and devastating breath of fatality. The smile died from horizon to horizon, and for days cold rains beat and lashed the forests. And, toward the end of that month, came the day which Samson had set for his departure. He had harvested the corn, and put the farm in order. He had packed into his battered saddlebags what things were to go with him into his new life. The sun had set in a sickly bank of murky, red-lined clouds. His mule, which knew the road, and could make a night trip, stood saddled by the stile. A kinsman was to lead it back from Hixon when Samson had gone. The boy slowly put on his patched and mud-stained overcoat. His face was sullen and glowering. There was a lump in his throat, like the lump that had been there when he stood with his mother's arm about his shoulders, and watched the dogs chase a rabbit by his father's grave. Supper had been eaten in silence. Now that the hour of departure had come, he felt the guilt of the deserter. He realized how aged his uncle seemed, and how the old man hunched forward over the plate as they ate the last meal they should, for a long while, have together. It was only by sullen taciturnity that he could retain his composure.

At the threshold, with the saddlebags over his left forearm and the rifle in his hand, he paused. His uncle stood at his elbow and the boy put out his hand.

"Good-by, Unc' Spicer," was all he said. The old man, who had been his second father, shook hands. His face, too, was expressionless, but he felt that he was saying farewell to a soldier of genius who was abandoning the field. And he loved the boy with all the centered power of an isolated heart.

"Hadn't ye better take a lantern?" he questioned.

"No, I reckon I won't need none." And Samson went out, and mounted his mule.

A half-mile along the road, he halted and dismounted. There, in a small cove, surrounded by a tangle of briars and blackberry bushes, stood a small and dilapidated "meeting house" and churchyard, which he must visit. He made his way through the rough undergrowth to the unkempt half-acre, and halted before the leaning headstones which marked two graves. With a sudden emotion, he swept the back of his hand across his eyes. He did not remove his hat, but he stood in the drizzle of cold rain for a moment of silence, and then he said:

"Pap, I hain't fergot. I don't want ye ter think thet I've fergot."

Before he arrived at the Widow Miller's, the rain had stopped and the clouds had broken. Back of them was a discouraged moon, which sometimes showed its face for a fitful moment, only to disappear. The wind was noisily floundering through the treetops. Near the stile, Samson gave his whippoorwill call. It was, perhaps, not quite so clear or true as usual, but that did not matter. There were no other whippoorwills calling at this season to confuse signals. He crossed the stile, and with a word quieted Sally's dog as it rose to challenge him, and then went with him, licking his hand.

Sally opened the door, and smiled. She had spent the day nerving herself for this farewell, and at least until the moment of leave-taking she would be safe from tears. The Widow Miller and her son soon left them alone, and the boy and girl sat before the blazing logs.

For a time, an awkward silence fell between them. Sally had donned her best dress, and braided her red-brown hair. She sat with her chin in her palms, and the fire kissed her cheeks and temples into color. That picture and the look in her eyes remained with Samson for a long while, and there were times of doubt and perplexity when he closed his eyes and steadied himself by visualizing it all again in his heart. At last, the boy rose, and went over to the corner where he had placed his gun. He took it up, and laid it on the hearth between them.

"Sally," he said, "I wants ter tell ye some things thet I hain't never said ter nobody else. In the fust place, I wants ye ter keep this hyar gun fer me."

The girl's eyes widened with surprise.

"Hain't ye a-goin' ter take hit with ye, Samson?"

He shook his head.

"I hain't a-goin' ter need hit down below. Nobody don't use 'em down thar. I've got my pistol, an' I reckon thet will be enough."

"I'll take good keer of hit," she promised.

The boy took out of his pockets a box of cartridges and a small package tied in a greasy rag.

"Hit's loaded, Sally, an' hit's cleaned an' hit's greased. Hit's ready fer use."

Again, she nodded in silent assent, and the boy began speaking in a slow, careful voice, which gradually mounted into tense emotion.

"Sally, thet thar gun was my pap's. When he lay a-dyin', he gave hit ter me, an' he gave me a job ter do with hit. When I was a little feller, I used ter set up 'most all day, polishin' thet gun an' gittin' hit ready. I used ter go out in the woods, an' practise shootin' hit at things, tell I larned how ter handle hit. I reckon thar hain't many fellers round here thet kin beat me now." He paused, and the girl hastened to corroborate.

"Thar hain't none, Samson."

"There hain't nothin' in the world, Sally, thet I prizes like I does thet gun. Hit's got a job ter do. . . . Thar hain't but one person in the world I'd trust hit with. Thet's you. . . . I wants ye ter keep hit fer me, an' ter keep hit ready. . . . They thinks round hyar I'm quittin', but I hain't. I'm a-comin' back, an', when I comes, I'll need this hyar thing—an' I'll need hit bad." He took up the rifle, and ran his hand caressingly along its lock and barrel.

"I don't know when I'm a-comin'," he said, slowly, "but, when I calls fer this, I'm shore a-goin' ter need hit quick. I wants hit ter be ready fer me, day er night. Maybe, nobody won't know I'm hyar. . . . Maybe, I won't want nobody ter know. . . . But, when I whistles out thar like a whippoorwill, I wants ye ter slip out—an' fotch me thet gun!"

He stopped, and bent forward. His face was tense, and his eyes were glinting with purpose. His lips were tight set and fanatical.

"Samson," said the girl, reaching out and taking the weapon from his hands, "ef I'm alive when ye comes, I'll do hit. I promises ye. An'," she added, "ef I hain't alive, hit'll be standin' thar in thet corner. I'll grease hit, an' keep hit loaded, an' when ye calls, I'll fotch hit out thar to ye."

The youth nodded. "I mout come anytime, but likely as not I'll hev ter come a-fightin' when I comes."

Next, he produced an envelope.

"This here is a letter I've done writ ter myself," he explained. He drew out the sheet, and read:

"Samson, come back." Then he handed the missive to the girl. "Thet there is addressed ter me, in care of Mr. Lescott. . . . . Ef anything happens—ef Unc' Spicer needs me—I wants yer ter mail thet ter me quick. He says as how he won't never call me back, but, Sally, I wants thet you shall send fer me, ef they needs me. I hain't a-goin' ter write no letters home. Unc' Spicer can't read, an' you can't read much either. But I'll plumb shore be thinkin' about ye day an' night."

She gulped and nodded.

"Yes, Samson," was all she said.

The boy rose.

"I reckon I'd better be gettin' along," he announced.

The girl suddenly reached out both hands, and seized his coat. She held him tight, and rose, facing him. Her upturned face grew very pallid, and her eyes widened. They were dry, and her lips were tightly closed, but, through the tearless pupils, in the firelight, the boy could read her soul, and her soul was sobbing.

He drew her toward him, and held her very tight.

"Sally," he said, in a voice which threatened to choke, "I wants ye ter take keer of yeself. Ye hain't like these other gals round here. Ye hain't got big hands an' feet. Ye kain't stand es much es they kin. Don't stay out in the night air too much—an', Sally—fer God's sake take keer of yeself!" He broke off, and picked up his hat.

"An' that gun, Sally," he repeated at the door, "that there's the most precious thing I've got. I loves hit better then anything—take keer of hit."

Again, she caught at his shoulders.

"Does ye love hit better'n ye do me, Samson?" she demanded.

He hesitated.

"I reckon ye knows how much I loves ye, Saily," he said, slowly, "but I've done made a promise, an' thet gun's a-goin' ter keep hit fer me."

They went together out to the stile, he still carrying his rifle, as though loath to let it go, and she crossed with him to the road.

As he untied his reins, she threw her arms about his neck, and for a long while they stood there under the clouds and stars, as he held her close. There was no eloquence of leave-taking, no professions of undying love, for these two hearts were inarticulate and dizzily clinging to a wilderness code of self-repression—and they had reached a point where speech would have swept them both away to a break-down.

But as they stood, their arms gripping each other, each heart pounding on the other's breast, it was with a pulsing that spoke in the torrent their lips dammed, and between the two even in this farewell embrace was the rifle which stood emblematical of the man's life and mission and heredity. Its cold metal lay in a line between their warm breasts, separating, yet uniting them, and they clung to each other across its rigid barrel, as a man and woman may cling with the child between them which belongs to both, and makes them one. As yet, she had shed no tears. Then, he mounted and was swallowed in the dark. It was not until the thud of his mule's hoofs were lost in the distance that the girl climbed back to the top of the stile, and dropped down. Then, she lifted the gun and pressed it close to her bosom, and sat silently sobbing for a long while.

"He's done gone away," she moaned, "an' he won't never come back no more—but ef he does come"—she raised her eyes to the stars as though calling them to witness—"ef he does come, I'll shore be a-waitin'. Lord God, make him come back!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE boy from Misery rode slowly toward Hixon. At times, the moon struggled out and made the shadows black along the way. At other times, it was like riding in a huge caldron of pitch. When he passed into that stretch of country at whose heart Jesse Purvy dwelt, he raised his voice in song. His singing was very bad, and the ballad lacked tune, but it served its purpose of saving him from the suspicion of furtiveness. Though the front of the house was blank, behind its heavy shutters he knew that his coming might be noted, and night-riding at this particular spot might be misconstrued in the absence of frank warning.

The correctness of his inference brought a brief smile to his lips when he crossed the creek that skirted the orchard, and heard a stable door creak softly behind him. He was to be followed again—and watched, but he did not look back or pause to listen for the hoof-beats of his unsolicited escort. On the soft mud of the road, he would hardly have heard them, had he bent his ear and drawn rein. He rode at a walk, for his train would not leave until five o'clock in the morning. There was time in plenty.

It was cold and depressing as he trudged the empty streets from the livery stable to the railroad station, carrying his saddlebags over his arm. His last farewell had been taken when he left the old mule behind in the rickety livery stable. It had been unemotional, too, but the ragged creature had raised its stubborn head, and rubbed its soft nose against his shoulder as though in realization of the parting—and unwilling realization. He had roughly laid his hand for a moment on the muzzle, and turned on his heel.

He was all unconscious that he presented a figure which would seem ludicrous in the great world to which he had looked with such eagerness. The lamps burned murkily about the railroad station, and a heavy fog cloaked the hills. At last he heard the whistle and saw the blazing headlight, and a minute later he had pushed his way into the smoking-car and dropped his saddlebags on the seat beside him. Then, for the first time, he saw and recognized his watchers. Purvy meant to have Samson shadowed as far as Lexington, and his movements from that point definitely reported. Jim Asberry and Aaron Hollis were the chosen spies. He did not speak to the two enemies who took seats across the car, but his face hardened, and his brows came together in a black scowl.

"When I gits back," he promised himself, "you'll be one of the fust folks I'll look fer, Jim Asberry, damn ye! All I hopes is thet nobody else don't git ye fust Ye b'longs ter me."

He was not quite certain yet that Jim Asberry had murdered his father, but he knew that Asberry was one of the coterie of "killers" who took their blood hire from Purvy, and he knew that Asberry had sworn to "git" him. To sit in the same car with these men and to force himself to withhold his hand. was a hard bullet

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for Samson South to chew, but he had bided his time thus far, and he would bide it to the end. When that end came, it would also be the end for Purvy and Asberry. He disliked Hollis, too, but with a less definite and intense hatred. Samson wished that one of the henchmen would make a move toward attack. He made no concealment of his own readiness. He removed both overcoat and coat, leaving exposed to view the heavy revolver which was strapped under his left arm. He even unbuttoned the leather flap of the holster, and then being cleared for action, sat glowering across the aisle, with his eyes not on the faces but upon the hands of the two Purvy spies.

The wrench of partings, the long raw ride and dispiriting gloom of the darkness before dawn had taken out of the boy's mind all the sparkle of anticipation and left only melancholy and hate. He felt for the moment that, had these men attacked him and thrown him back into the life he was leaving, back into the war without fault on his part, he would be glad. The fierce activity of fighting would be welcome to his mood. He longed for the appeasement of a thoroughly satisfied vengeance. But the two watchers across the car were not ordered to fight and so they made no move. They did not seem to see Samson. They did not appear to have noticed his inviting readiness for combat. They did not remove their coats. At Lexington, where he had several hours to wait, Samson bought a "snack" at a restaurant near the station and then strolled about the adjacent streets, still carrying his saddlebags, for he knew nothing of the workings of check-rooms. When he returned to the depot with his open wallet in his hand, and asked for a ticket to New York, the agent looked up and his lips unguardedly broke into a smile of amusement. It was a good-humored smile, but Samson saw that it was inspired by some sort of joke, and he divined that the joke was—himself!

"What's the matter?" he inquired very quietly, though his chin stiffened. "Don't ye sell tickets ter New York?"

The man behind the grilled wicket read a spirit as swift to resent ridicule as that of d'Artagnan had been when he rode his orange-colored nag into the streets of Paris. His face sobered, and his manner became attentive. He was wondering what complications lay ahead of this raw creature whose crudity of appearance was so at odds with the compelling quality of his eyes.

"Do you want a Pullman reservation?" he asked.

"What's thet?" The boy put the question with a steadiness of gaze that seemed to defy the agent to entertain even a subconsciously critical thought as to his ignorance.

The ticket man explained sleeping- and dining-cars. He had rather expected the boy to choose the day coach, but Samson merely said:

"I wants the best thar is." He counted out the additional money, and turned gravely from the window. The sleeping-car to which he was assigned was almost empty, but he felt upon him the interested gaze of those few eyes that were turned toward his entrance. He engaged every pair with a pair very clear and steady and undropping, until somehow each lip that had started to twist in amusement straightened, and the twinkle that rose at first glance sobered at second. He did not know why an old gentleman in a plaid traveling cap, who looked up from a magazine, turned his gaze out of the window with an expression of grave thoughtfulness. To himself, the old gentleman was irrelevantly quoting a line or two of verse:

"'. . . Unmade, unhandled, unmeet—
Ye pushed them raw to the battle, as ye picked them
raw from the street—'

"Only," added the old gentleman under his breath, "this one hasn't even the training of the streets—but with those eyes he'll get somewhere."

The porter paused and asked to see Samson's ticket. Mentally, he observed:

"Po' white trash!" Then, he looked again, for the boy's eyes were discomfortingly on his fat, black face, and the porter straightway decided to be polite. Yet, for all his specious seeming of unconcern, Samson was waking to the fact that he was a scarecrow, and his sensitive pride made him cut his meals short in the dining-car, where he was kept busy beating down inquisitive eyes with his defiant gaze. He resolved after some thought upon a definite policy. It was a very old policy, but to him new—and a discovery. He would change nothing in himself that involved a surrender of code or conviction. But, wherever it could be done with honor, he would concede to custom. He had come to learn, not to give an exhibition of stubbornness. Whatever the outside world could offer with a recommendation to his good sense, that thing he would adopt and make his own.

It was late in the second afternoon when he stepped from the train at Jersey City, to be engulfed in an unimagined roar and congestion. Here, it was impossible to hold his own against the unconcealed laughter of the many, and he stood for an instant glaring about like a caged tiger, while three currents of humanity separated and flowed toward the three ferry exits. It was a moment of longing for the quiet of his ancient hills, where nothing more formidable than blood enemies existed to disquiet and perplex a man's philosophy. Those were things he understood—and even enemies at home did not laugh at a man's peculiarities. For the first time in his life, Samson felt a tremor of something like terror, terror of a great, vague thing, too vast and intangible to combat, and possessed of the measureless power of many hurricanes. Then, he saw the smiling face of Lescott, and Lescott's extended hand. Even Lescott, immaculately garbed and fur-coated, seemed almost a stranger, and the boy's feeling of intimacy froze to inward constraint and diffidence. But Lescott knew nothing of that. The stoic in Samson held true, masking his emotions.

"So you came," said the New Yorker, heartily, grasping the boy's hand. "Where's your luggage? We'll just pick that up, and make a dash for the ferry."

"Hyar hit is," replied Samson, who still carried his saddlebags. The painter's eyes twinkled, but the mirth was so frank and friendly that the boy, instead of glaring in defiance, grinned responsively.

"Right, oh!" laughed Lescott. "I thought maybe you'd brought a trunk, but it's the wise man who travels light."

"I reckon I'm pretty green," acknowledged the youth somewhat ruefully. "But I hain't been studyin' on what I looked like. I reckon thet don't make much diff'rence."

"Not much," affirmed the other, with conviction. "Let the men with little souls spend their thought on that."

The artist watched his protégé narrowly as they took their places against the forward rail of the ferry-deck, and the boat stood out into the crashing water traffic of North River. What Samson saw must be absolutely bewildering. Ears attuned to hear a breaking twig must ache to this hoarse shrieking of whistles. To the west, in the evening's fading color, the sky-line of lower Manhattan bit the sky with its serried line of fangs.

Yet, Samson leaned on the rail without comment, and his face told nothing. Lescott waited for some expression, and, when none came, he casually suggested:

"Samson, that is considered rather an impressive panorama over there. What do you think of it?"

"Ef somebody was ter ask ye ter describe the shape of a rainstorm, what would ye say?" countered the boy.

Lescott laughed.

"I guess I wouldn't try to say."

"I reckon," replied the mountaineer, "I won't try, neither."

"Do you find it anything like the thing expected?" No New Yorker can allow a stranger to be unimpressed with that sky-line.

"I didn't have no notion what to expect." Samson's voice was matter-of-fact. "I 'lowed I'd jest wait and see."

He followed Lescott out to the foot of Twenty-third Street, and stepped with him into the tonneau of the painter's waiting car. Lescott lived with his family up-town, for it happened that, had his canvases possessed no value whatever, he would still have been in a position to drive his motor, and follow his impulses about the world. Lescott himself had found it necessary to overcome family opposition when he had determined to follow the career of painting. His people had been in finance, and they had expected him to take the position to which he logically fell heir in activities that center about Wall Street. He, too, had at first been regarded as recreant to traditions. For that reason, he felt a full sympathy with Samson. The painter's place in the social world—although he preferred his other world of Art—was so secure that he was free from any petty embarrassment in standing sponsor for a wild man from the hills. If he did not take the boy to his home, it was because he understood that a life which must be not only full of early embarrassment, but positively revolutionary, should be approached by easy stages. Consequently, the car turned down Fifth Avenue, passed under the arch, and drew up before a door just off Washington Square, where the landscape painter had a studio suite. There were sleeping-rooms and such accessories as seemed to the boy unheard-of luxury, though Lescott regarded the place as a makeshift annex to his home establishment.

"You'd better take your time in selecting permanent quarters," was his careless fashion of explaining to Samson. "It's just as well not to hurry. You are to stay here with me, as long as you will."

"I'm obleeged ter ye," replied the boy, to whose training in open-doored hospitality the invitation seemed only natural. The evening meal was brought in from a neighboring hotel, and the two men dined before an open fire, Samson eating in mountain silence, while his host chatted and asked questions. The place was quiet for New York, but to Samson it seemed an insufferable pandemonium. He found himself longing for the velvet-soft quiet of the nightfalls he had known.

"Samson," suggested the painter, when the dinner things had been carried out and they were alone, "you are here for two purposes: first to study painting; second, to educate and equip yourself for coming conditions. It's going to take work, more work, and then some more work."

"I hain't skeered of work."

"I believe that. Also, you must keep out of trouble. You've got to ride your fighting instinct with a strong curb."

"I don't 'low to let nobody run over me." The statement was not argumentative; only an announcement of a principle which was not subject to modification.

"All right, but until you learn the ropes, let me advise you."

The boy gazed into the fire for a few moments of silence.

"I gives ye my hand on thet," he promised.

At eleven o'clock the painter, having shown his guest over the premises, said good-night, and went up-town to his own house. Samson lay a long while awake, with many disquieting reflections. Before his closed eyes rose insistently the picture of a smoky cabin with a puncheon floor and of a girl upon whose cheeks and temples flickered orange and vermilion lights. To his ears came the roar of elevated trains, and, since a fog had risen over the Hudson, the endless night-splitting screams of brazen-throated ferry whistles. He tossed on a mattress which seemed hard and comfortless, and longed for a feather-bed.

"Good-night, Sally," he almost groaned. "I wisht I was back thar whar I belongs." . . . And Sally, more than a thousand miles away, was shivering on the top of a stile with a white, grief-torn little face, wishing that, too.

Meanwhile Lescott, letting himself into a house overlooking the Park, was hailed by a chorus of voices from the dining-room. He turned and went in to join a gay group just back from the opera. As he thoughtfully mixed himself a highball, they bombarded him with questions.

"Why didn't you bring your barbarian with you?" demanded a dark-eyed girl, who looked very much as Lescott himself might have looked had he been a girl—and very young and lovely. The painter always thought of his sister as the family's *edition de luxe*. Now, she flashed on him an affectionate smile, and added: "We have been waiting to see him. Must we go to bed disappointed?"

George stood looking down on them, and tinkled the ice in his glass.

"He wasn't brought on for purposes of exhibition, Drennie," he smiled. "I was afraid, if he came in here in the fashion of his arrival—carrying his saddlebags—you ultra-civilized folk might have laughed."

A roar of laughter at the picture vindicated Lescott's assumption.

"No! Now, actually with saddlebags?" echoed a young fellow with a likeable face which was for the moment incredulously amused. "That goes Dick Whittington one better. You do make some rare discoveries, George. We celebrate you."

"Thanks, Horton," commented the painter, dryly. "When you New Yorkers have learned what these barbarians already know, the control of your over-sensitized risibles and a courtesy deeper than your shirt-fronts—maybe I'll let you have a look. Meantime, I'm much too fond of all of you to risk letting you laugh at my barbarian."

CHAPTER XIV

THE first peep of daylight through the studio skylight found the mountain boy awake. Before the daylight came he had seen the stars through its panes. Lescott's servant, temporarily assigned to the studio, was still sleeping when Samson dressed and went out. As he put on his clothes, he followed his custom of strapping the pistol-holster under his left armpit outside his shirt. He did it with no particular thought and from force of habit. His steps carried him first into Washington Square, at this cheerless hour empty except for a shivering and huddled figure on a bench and a rattling milk-cart. The boy wandered aimlessly until, an hour later, he found himself on Bleecker Street, as that thoroughfare began to awaken and take up its day's activity. The smaller shops that lie in the shadow of the elevated trestle were opening their doors. Samson had been reflecting on the amused glances he had inspired yesterday and, when he came to a store with a tawdry window display of haberdashery and ready-made clothing, he decided to go in and investigate.

Evidently, the garments he now wore gave him an appearance of poverty and meanness, which did not comport with the dignity of a South. Had any one else criticized his appearance his resentment would have blazed, but he could make voluntary admissions. The shopkeeper's curiosity was somewhat piqued by a manner of speech and appearance which were, to him, new, and which he could not classify. His first impression of the boy in the stained suit, slouch hat, and patched overcoat, was much the same as that which the Pullman porter had mentally summed up as, "Po' white trash"; but the Yiddish shopman could not place his prospective customer under any head or type with which he was familiar. He was neither "kike," "wop," "rough-neck," nor beggar, and, as the proprietor laid out his wares with unctuous solicitude, he was, also, studying his unresponsive and early visitor. When Samson, for the purpose of trying on a coat and vest, took off his own outer garments, and displayed, without apology or explanation, a huge and murderous-looking revolver, the merchant became nervously excited. Had Samson made gratifying purchases, he might have seen nothing, but it occurred to the mountaineer, just as he was counting money from a stuffed purse, that it would perhaps be wiser to wait and consult Lescott in matters of sartorial selection. So, with incisive bluntness, he countermanded his order—and made an enemy. The shopkeeper, standing at the door of his basement establishment, combed his beard with his fingers, and thought regretfully of the fat wallet; and, a minute after, when two policemen came by, walking together, he awoke suddenly to his responsibilities as a citizen. He pointed to the figure now half a block away.

"Dat feller," he said, "chust vent out off my blace. He's got a young cannon strapped to his vish-bone. I don't know if he's chust a rube, or if maybe he's bad. Anyway, he's a gun-toter."

The two patrolmen only nodded, and sauntered on.

They did not hurry, but neither did Samson. Pausing to gaze into a window filled with Italian sweetmeats, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to find himself looking into two pairs of accusing eyes.

"What's your game?" shortly demanded one of the officers.

"What's ther matter?" countered Samson, as tartly as he had been questioned.

"Don't you know better than to tote a gun around this town?"

"I reckon thet's my business, hain't hit?"

The boy stepped back, and shook the offending hand from his shoulder. His gorge was rising, but he controlled it, and turned on his heel, with the manner of one saying the final word.

"I reckon ye're a-barkin' up ther wrong tree."

"Not by a damned sight, we ain't!" One of the patrolmen seized and pinioned his arms, while the second threateningly lifted his club.

"Don't try to start anything, young feller," he warned. The street was awake now and the ever-curious crowd began to gather. The big officer at Samson's back held his arms locked and gave curt directions to his partner. "Go through him, Quinn."

Samson recognized that he was in the hands of the law, and a different sort of law from that which he had known on Misery. He made no effort to struggle, but looked very straight and unblinkingly into the eyes of the club-wielder.

"Don't ye hit me with thet thing," he said, quietly. "I warns ye."

The officer laughed as he ran his left hand over Samson's hips and chest, and brought out the offending weapon.

"I guess that's about all. We'll let you explain the rest of it to the judge. It's a trick on the Island for yours."

The Island meant nothing to Samson South, but the derisive laughter of the crowd, and the roughness with which the two bluecoats swung him around, and ordered him to march, set on edge every defiant nerve. Still, he gazed directly into the faces of his captors, and inquired with a cruelly forced calm:

"Does ye 'low ter take me ter the jail-house?"

"Can that rube stuff. Get along, get along!" And the officers started him on his journey with a shove that sent him lurching and stumbling forward. Then, the curb of control slipped. The prisoner wheeled, his face distorted with passion, and lashed out with his fist to the face of the biggest patrolman. It was a foolish and hopeless attack, as the boy realized, but in his code it was necessary. One must resent gratuitous insult whatever the odds, and he fought with such concentrated fury and swiftness, after his rude hill method of "fist and skull," driving in terrific blows with hands and head, that the crowd breathed deep with the delicious excitement of the combat—and regretted its brevity.

The amazed officers, for an instant handicapped by their surprise, since they were expecting to monopolize the brutality of the occasion, came to their senses, and had instant recourse to the comforting reinforcement of their locust clubs. The boy went down under a rat-tat of night sticks, which left him as groggy and easy to handle as a fainting woman.

"You got ter hand it ter dat guy," commented a sweater-clad onlooker, as they dragged Samson into a doorway to await the wagon. "He was goin' some while he lasted."

The boy was conscious again, though still faint, when the desk sergeant wrote on the station-house blotter:

"Carrying a deadly weapon, and resisting an officer."

The lieutenant had strolled in, and was contemplatively turning over in his hand the heavy forty-five-calibre Colt.

"Some rod that!" he announced. "We don't get many like it here. Where did you breeze in from, young fellow?"

"Thet's my business," growled Samson. Then, he added: "I'll be obleeged if ye'll send word ter Mr. George Lescott ter come an' bail me out."

"You seem to know the procedure," remarked the desk sergeant, with a smile. "Who is Mr. George Lescott, and where's his hang-out?"

One of the arresting officers looked up from wiping with his handkerchief the sweat-band of his helmet.

"George Lescott?" he repeated. "I know him. He's got one of them studios just off Washington Square. He drives down-town in a car the size of the Olympic. I don't know how he'd get acquainted with a boob like this."

"Oh, well!" the desk sergeant yawned. "Stick him in the cage. We'll call up this Lescott party later on. I guess he's still in the hay, and it might make him peevish to wake him up."

Left alone in the police-station cell, the boy began to think. First of all, he was puzzled. He had fared forth peaceably, and spoken to no one except the storekeeper. To force a man into peace by denying him his gun, seemed as unreasonable as to prevent fisticuffs by cutting off hands. But, also, a deep sense of shame swept over him, and scalded him. Getting into trouble here was, somehow, different from getting into trouble at home—and, in some strange way, bitterly humiliating.

Lescott had risen early, meaning to go down to the studio, and have breakfast with Samson. His mother and sister were leaving for Bermuda by a nine o'clock sailing. Consequently, eight o'clock found the household gathered in the breakfast-room, supplemented by Mr. Wilfred Horton, whose orchids Adrienne Lescott was wearing, and whose luggage was already at the wharf.

"Since Wilfred is in the party to take care of things, and look after you," suggested Lescott, as he came into the room a trifle late, "I think I'll say good-by here, and run along to the studio. Samson is probably feeling like a new boy in school this morning. You'll find the usual litter of flowers and fiction in your staterooms to attest my filial and brotherly devotion."

"Was the brotherly sentiment addressed to me?" inquired Wilfred, with an unsmiling and brazen gravity that brought to the girl's eyes and lips a half-mocking and wholly decorative twinkle of amusement.

"Just because I try to be a sister to you, Wilfred," she calmly reproved, "I can't undertake to make my brother do it, too. Besides, he couldn't be a sister to you."

"But by dropping that attitude—which is entirely gratuitous—you will compel him to assume it. My sentiment as regards brotherly love is brief and terse, 'Let George do it!'" Mr. Horton was complacently consuming his breakfast with an excellent appetite, to which the prospect of six weeks among Bermuda lilies with Adrienne lent a fillip.

"So, brother-to-be," he continued, "you have my permission to run along down-town, and feed your savage."

"Beg pardon, sir!" The Lescott butler leaned close to the painter's ear, and spoke with a note of apology as though deploring the necessity of broaching such a subject. "But will you kindly speak with the Macdougal Street Police Station?"

"With the what?" Lescott turned in surprise, while Horton surrendered himself to unrestrained and boisterous laughter.

"The barbarian!" he exclaimed. "I call that snappy work. Twelve hours in New York, and a run-in with the police! I've noticed," he added, as the painter hurriedly quitted the room, "that, when you take the bad man out of his own cock-pit, he rarely lasts as far as the second round."

"It occurs to me, Wilfred," suggested Adrienne, with the hint of warning in her voice, "that you may be just a trifle overdoing your attitude of amusement as to this barbarian. George is fond of him, and believes in him, and George is quite often right in his judgment."

"George," added Mrs. Lescott, "had a broken arm down there in the mountains, and these people were kind to him in many ways. I wish I could see Mr. South, and thank him."

Lescott's manner over the telephone was indicating to a surprised desk sergeant a decidedly greater interest than had been anticipated, and, after a brief and pointed conversation in that quarter, he called another number. It was a private number, not included in the telephone book and communicated with the residence of an attorney who would not have permitted the generality of clients to disturb him in advance of office hours.

A realization that the "gun-lugger" had friends "higher up" percolated at the station-house in another hour, when a limousine halted at the door, and a legal celebrity, whose ways were not the ways of police stations or magistrates' courts, stepped to the curb.

"I am waiting to meet Mr. Lescott," announced the Honorable Mr. Wickliffe, curtly.

When a continuance of the case had been secured, and bond given, the famous lawyer and Samson lunched together at the studio as Lescott's guests, and, after the legal luminary had thawed the boy's native reserve and wrung from him his story, he was interested enough to use all his eloquence and logic in his efforts to show the mountaineer what inherent necessities of justice lay back of seemingly restrictive laws.

"You simply 'got in bad' through your failure to understand conditions here," laughed the lawyer. "I guess we can pull you through, but in future you'll have to submit to some guidance, my boy."

And Samson, rather to Lescott's surprise, nodded his head with only a ghost of resentment. From friends, he was willing to learn.

Lescott had been afraid that this initial experience would have an extinguishing effect on Samson's ambitions. He half-expected to hear the dogged announcement, "I reckon I'll go back home. I don't b'long hyar nohow." But no such remark came.

One night, they sat in the café of an old French hostelry where, in the polyglot chatter of three languages, one hears much shop talk of art and literature. Between the mirrored walls, Samson was for the first time glimpsing the shallow sparkle of Bohemia. The orchestra was playing an appealing waltz. Among the diners were women gowned as he had never seen women gowned before. They sat with men, and met the challenge of ardent glances with dreamy eyes. They hummed an accompaniment to the air, and sometimes loudly and publicly quarreled. But Samson looked on as taciturn and unmoved as though he had never dined elsewhere. And yet, his eyes were busy, for suddenly he laid down his knife, and picked up his fork.

"Hit 'pears like I've got a passel of things ter l'arn," he said, earnestly. "I reckon I mout as well begin by l'arnin' how ter eat." He had heretofore regarded a fork only as a skewer with which to hold meat in the cutting.

Lescott laughed.

"Most rules of social usage," he explained, "go back to the test of efficiency. It is considered good form to eat with the fork, principally because it is more efficient."

The boy nodded.

"All right," he acquiesced. "You l'arn me all them things, an' I'll be obleeged ter ye. Things is diff'rent in diff'rent places. I reckon the Souths hes a right ter behave es good es anybody."

When a man, whose youth and courage are at their zenith, and whose brain is tuned to concert pitch, is thrown neck and crop out of squalid isolation into the melting pot of Manhattan, puzzling problems of readjustment must follow. Samson's half-starved mind was reaching out squid-like tentacles in every direction. He was saying little, seeing much, not yet coördinating or tabulating, but grimly bolting every morsel of enlightenment. Later, he would digest; now, he only gorged. Before he could hope to benefit by the advanced instruction of the life-classes, he must toil and sweat over the primer stages of drawing. Several months were spent laboring with charcoal and paper over plaster casts in Lescott's studio, and Lescott himself played instructor. When the skylight darkened with the coming of evening, the boy whose mountain nature cried out for exercise went for long tramps that carried him over many miles of city pavements, and after that, when the gas was lit, he turned, still insatiably hungry, to volumes of history, and algebra, and facts. So gluttonous was his protégé's application that the painter felt called on to remonstrate against the danger of overwork. But Samson only laughed; that was one of the things he had learned to do since he left the mountains.

"I reckon," he drawled, "that as long as I'm at work, I kin keep out of trouble. Seems like that's the only way I kin do it."

* * * * * *

A sloop-rigged boat with a crew of two was dancing before a brisk breeze through blue Bermuda waters. Off to the right, Hamilton rose sheer and colorful from the bay. At the tiller sat the white-clad figure of

Adrienne Lescott. Puffs of wind that whipped the tautly bellying sheets lashed her dark hair about her face. Her lips, vividly red like poppy-petals, were just now curved into an amused smile, which made them even more than ordinarily kissable and tantalizing. Her companion was neglecting his nominal duty of tending the sheet to watch her.

"Wilfred," she teased, "your contrast is quite startling—and, in a way, effective. From head to foot, you are spotless white—but your scowl is absolutely 'the blackest black that our eyes endure.' And," she added, in an injured voice, "I'm sure I've been very nice to you."

"I have not yet begun to scowl," he assured her, and proceeded to show what superlatives of saturnine expression he held in reserve. "See here, Drennie, I know perfectly well that I'm a sheer imbecile to reveal the fact that you've made me mad. It pleases you too perfectly. It makes you happier than is good for you, but——"

"It's a terrible thing to make me happy, isn't it?" she inquired, sweetly.

"Unspeakably so, when you derive happiness from the torture of your fellow-man."

"My brother-man," she amiably corrected him.

"Good Lord!" he groaned in desperation. "I ought to turn cave man, and seize you by the hair—and drag you to the nearest minister—or prophet, or whoever could marry us. Then, after the ceremony, I ought to drag you to my own grotto, and beat you."

"Would I have to wear my wedding ring in my nose?" She put the question with the manner of one much interested in acquiring useful information.

"Drennie, for the nine-hundred-thousandth time; simply, in the interests of harmony and to break the deadlock, will you marry me?"

"Not this afternoon," she smiled. "Watch for the boom! I'm going to bring her round."

The young man promptly ducked his head, and played out the line, as the boat dipped her masthead waterward, and came about on the other tack. When the sails were again drumming under the fingers of the wind, she added:

"Besides, I'm not sure that harmony is what I want."

"You know you'll have to marry me in the end. Why not now?" he persisted, doggedly. "We are simply wasting our youth, dear."

His tone had become so calamitous that the girl could not restrain a peal of very musical laughter.

"Am I so very funny?" he inquired, with dignity.

"You are, when you are so very tragic," she assured him.

He realized that his temper was merely a challenge to her teasing, and he wisely fell back into his customary attitude of unruffled *insouciance.*

"Drennie, you have held me off since we were children. I believe I first announced my intention of marrying you when you were twelve. That intention remains unaltered. More: it is unalterable and inevitable. My reasons for wanting to needn't be rehearsed. It would take too long. I regard you as possessed of an alert and remarkable mind—one worthy of companionship with my own." Despite the frivolous badinage of his words and the humorous smile of his lips, his eyes hinted at an underlying intensity. "With no desire to flatter or spoil you, I find your personal aspect pleasing enough to satisfy me. And then, while a man should avoid emotionalism, I am in love with you." He moved over to a place in the sternsheets, and his face became intensely earnest. He dropped his hand over hers as it lay on the tiller shaft. "God knows, dear," he exclaimed, "how much I love you!"

Her eyes, after holding his for a moment, fell to the hand which still imprisoned her own. She shook her head, not in anger, but with a manner of gentle denial, until he released her fingers and stepped back.

"You are a dear, Wilfred," she comforted, "and I couldn't manage to get on without you, but you aren't marriageable—at least, not yet."

"Why not?" he argued. "I've stood back and twirled my thumbs all through your *début* winter. I've been Patience without the comfort of a pedestal. Now, will you give me three minutes to show you that you are not acting fairly, or nicely at all?"

"Duck!" warned the girl, and once more they fell silent in the sheer physical delight of two healthy young animals, clean-blooded and sport-loving, as the tall jib swept down; the "high side" swept up, and the boat hung for an exhilarating moment on the verge of capsizing. As it righted itself again, like the craft of a daring airman banking the pylons, the girl gave him a bright nod. "Now, go ahead," she acceded, "you have three minutes to put yourself in nomination as the exemplar of your age and times."

CHAPTER XV

THE young man settled back, and stuffed tobacco into a battered pipe. Then, with a lightness of tone which was assumed as a defense against her mischievous teasing, he began:

"Very well, Drennie. When you were twelve, which is at best an unimpressive age for the female of the species, I was eighteen, and all the world knows that at eighteen a man is very mature and important. You wore pigtails then, and it took a prophet's eye to foresee how wonderfully you were going to emerge from your chrysalis."

The idolatry of his eyes told how wonderful she seemed to him now.

"Yet, I fell in love with you, and I said to myself, 'I'll wait for her.' However, I didn't want to wait eternally. For eight years, I have danced willing attendance—following you through nursery, younger-set and *débutante* stages. In short, with no wish to trumpet too loudly my own virtues, I've been your *Fidus Achates*." His voice dropped from its pitch of antic whimsey, and became for a moment grave, as he added: "And, because of my love for you, I've lived a life almost as clean as your own."

"One's *Fidus Achates*, if I remember anything of my Latin, which I don't"—the girl spoke in that voice which the man loved best, because it had left off bantering, and become grave with such softness and depth of timbre as might have trembled in the reed pipes of a Sylvan Pan—"is one's really-truly friend. Everything that you claim for yourself is admitted—and many other things that you haven't claimed. Now, suppose you give me three minutes to make an accusation on other charges. They're not very grave faults, perhaps, by the standards of your world and mine, but to me, personally, they seem important."

Wilfred nodded, and said, gravely:

"I am waiting."

"In the first place, you are one of those men whose fortunes are listed in the top schedule—the swollen fortunes. Socialists would put you in the predatory class."

"Drennie," he groaned, "do you keep your heaven locked behind a gate of the Needle's Eye? It's not my fault that I'm rich. It was wished on me. If you are serious, I'm willing to become poor as Job's turkey. Show me the way to strip myself, and I'll stand shortly before you begging alms."

"To what end?" she questioned. "Poverty would be quite inconvenient. I shouldn't care for it. But hasn't it ever occurred to you that the man who wears the strongest and brightest mail, and who by his own confession is possessed of an alert brain, ought occasionally to be seen in the lists?"

"In short, your charge is that I am a shirker—and, since it's the same thing, a coward?"

Adrienne did not at once answer him, but she straightened out for an uninterrupted run before the wind, and by the tiny moss-green flecks, which moments of great seriousness brought to the depths of her eyes, he knew that she meant to speak the unveiled truth.

"Besides your own holdings in a lot of railways and things, you handle your mother's and sisters' property, don't you?"

He nodded.

"In a fashion, I do. I sign the necessary papers when the lawyers call me up, and ask me to come down-town."

"You are a director in the Metropole Trust Company?"

"Guilty."

"In the Consolidated Seacoast?"

"I believe so."

"In a half-dozen other things equally important?"

"Good Lord, Drennie, how can I answer all those questions off-hand? I don't carry a note-book in my yachting flannels."

Her voice was so serious that he wondered if it were not, also, a little contemptuous.

"Do you have to consult a note-book to answer those questions?"

"Those directorate jobs are purely honorary," he defended. "If I butted in with fool suggestions, they'd quite properly kick me out."

"With your friends, who are also share-holders, you could assume control of the *Morning Intelligence*, couldn't you?"

"I guess I could assume control, but what would I do with it?"

"Do you know the reputation of that newspaper?"

"I guess it's all right. It's conservative and newsy.

I read it every morning when I'm in town. It fits in very nicely between the grapefruit and the bacon-and-eggs."

"It is, also, powerful," she added, "and is said to be absolutely servile to corporate interests."

"Drennie, you talk like an anarchist. You are rich yourself, you know."

"And, against each of those other concerns, various charges have been made."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"It's not what I want you to do," she informed him; "it's what I'd like to see you want to do."

"Name it! I'll want to do it forthwith."

"I think, when you are one of a handful of the richest men in New York; when, for instance, you could dictate the policy of a great newspaper, yet know it only as the course that follows your grapefruit, you are a shirker and a drone, and are not playing the game." Her hand tightened on the tiller. "I think, if I were a man riding on to the polo field, I'd either try like the devil to drive the ball down between the posts, or I'd come inside, and take off my boots and colors. I wouldn't hover in lady-like futility around the edge of the scrimmage."

She knew that to Horton, who played polo like a fiend incarnate, the figure would be effective, and she whipped out her words with something very close to scorn.

"Duck your head!" she commanded shortly. "I'm coming about."

Possibly, she had thrown more of herself into her philippic than she had realized. Possibly, some of her emphasis imparted itself to her touch on the tiller, and jerked the sloop too violently into a sudden puff as it careened. At all events, the boat swung sidewise, trembled for an instant like a wounded gull, and then slapped its spread of canvas prone upon the water with a vicious report.

"Jump!" yelled the man, and, as he shouted, the girl disappeared over-side, perilously near the sheet. He knew the danger of coming up under a wet sail, and, diving from the high side, he swam with racing strokes toward the point where she had gone down. When Adrienne's head did not reappear, his alarm grew, and he plunged under water where the shadow of the overturned boat made everything cloudy and obscure to his wide-open eyes. He stroked his way back and forth through the purple fog that he found down there, until his lungs seemed on the point of bursting. Then, he paused at the surface, shaking the water from his face, and gazing anxiously about. The dark head was not visible, and once more, with a fury of growing terror, he plunged downward, and began searching the shadows. This time, he remained until his chest was aching with an absolute torture. If she had swallowed water under that canvas barrier this attempt would be the last that could avail. Then, just as it seemed that he was spending the last fraction of the last ounce of endurance, his aching eyes made out a vague shape, also swimming, and his hand touched another hand. She was safe, and together they came out of the opaqueness into water as translucent as sapphires, and rose to the surface.

"Where were you?" she inquired.

"I was looking for you—under the sail," he panted.

Adrienne laughed.

"I'm quite all right," she assured him. "I came up under the boat at first, but I got out easily enough, and went back to look for you."

They swam together to the capsized hull, and the girl thrust up one strong, slender hand to the stem, while with the other she wiped the water from her smiling eyes. The man also laid hold on the support, and hung there, filling his cramped lungs. Then, for just an instant, his hand closed over hers.

"There's my hand on it, Drennie," he said. "We start back to New York to-morrow, don't we? Well, when I get there, I put on overalls, and go to work. When I propose next, I'll have something to show."

A motor-boat had seen their plight, and was racing madly to their rescue, with a yard-high swirl of water thrown up from its nose and a fusillade of explosions trailing in its wake.

* * * * * *

Christmas came to Misery wrapped in a drab mantle of desolation. The mountains were like gigantic cones of raw and sticky chocolate, except where the snow lay patched upon their cheerless slopes. The skies were low and leaden, and across their gray stretches a spirit of squalid melancholy rode with the tarnished sun. Windowless cabins, with tight-closed doors, became cavernous dens untouched by the cleansing power of daylight. In their vitiated atmosphere, their humanity grew stolidly sullen. Nowhere was a hint of the season's cheer. The mountains knew only of such celebration as snuggling close to the jug of moonshine, and drinking out the day. Mountain children, who had never heard of Kris Kingle, knew of an ancient tradition that at Christmas midnight the cattle in the barns and fields knelt down, as they had knelt around the manger, and that along the ragged slopes of the hills the elder bushes ceased to rattle dead stalks, and burst into white sprays of momentary bloom.

Christmas itself was a week distant, and, at the cabin of the Widow Miller, Sally was sitting alone before the logs. She laid down the slate and spelling-book, over which her forehead had been strenuously puckered, and gazed somewhat mournfully into the blaze. Sally had a secret. It was a secret which she based on a faint hope. If Samson should come back to Misery, he would come back full of new notions. No man had ever yet returned from that outside world unaltered. No man ever would. A terrible premonition said he would not come at all, but, if he did—if he did—she must know how to read and write. Maybe, when she had learned a little more, she might even go to school for a term or two. She had not confided her secret. The widow would not have understood. The book and slate came out of their dusty cranny in the logs beside the fireplace only when the widow had withdrawn to her bed, and the freckled boy was dreaming of being old enough to kill Hollmans.

The cramped and distorted chirography on the slate was discouraging. It was all proving very hard work. The girl gazed for a time at something she saw in the embers, and then a faint smile came to her lips. By next Christmas, she would surprise Samson with a letter. It should be well written, and every "hain't" should be an "isn't." Of course, until then Samson would not write to her, because he would not know that she could read the letter—indeed, as yet the deciphering of "handwrite" was beyond her abilities.

She rose and replaced the slate and primer. Then, she took tenderly from its corner the rifle, which the boy had confided to her keeping, and unwrapped its greasy covering. She drew the cartridges from chamber and magazine, oiled the rifling, polished the lock, and reloaded the piece.

"Thar now," she said, softly, "I reckon ther old rifle-gun's ready."

As she sat there alone in the shuck-bottomed chair, the corners of the room wavered in huge shadows, and the smoke-blackened cavern of the fireplace, glaring like a volcano pit, threw her face into relief. She made a very lovely and pathetic picture. Her slender knees were drawn close together, and from her slim waist she bent forward, nursing the inanimate thing which she valued and tended, because Samson valued it. Her violet eyes held the heart-touching wistfulness of utter loneliness, and her lips drooped. This small girl, dreaming her dreams of hope against hope, with the vast isolation of the hills about her, was a little monument of unflinching loyalty and simple courage, and, as she sat, she patted the rifle with as soft a touch as though she had been dandling Samson's child—and her own—on her knee. There was no speck of rust in the unused muzzle, no hitch in the easily sliding mechanism of the breechblock. The hero's weapon was in readiness to his hand, as the bow of Ulysses awaited the coming of the wanderer.

Then, with sudden interruption to her reflections, came a rattling on the cabin door. She sat up and listened. Night visitors were rare at the Widow Miller's. Sally waited, holding her breath, until the sound was repeated.

"Who is hit?" she demanded in a low voice.

"Hit's me—Tam'rack!" came the reply, very low and cautious, and somewhat shamefaced.

"What does ye want?"

"Let me in, Sally," whined the kinsman, desperately. "They're atter me. They won't think to come hyar."

Sally had not seen her cousin since Samson had forbidden his coming to the house. Since Samson's departure, the troublesome kinsman, too, had been somewhere "down below," holding his railroad job. But the call for protection was imperative. She set the gun out of sight against the mantle-shelf, and, walking over unwillingly, opened the door.

The mud-spattered man came in, glancing about him half-furtively, and went to the fireplace. There, he held his hands to the blaze.

"Hit's cold outdoors," he said.

"What manner of deviltry hev ye been into now, Tam'rack?" inquired the girl. "Kain't ye never keep outen trouble?"

The self-confessed refugee did not at once reply. When he did, it was to ask:

"Is the widder asleep?"

Sally saw from his blood-shot eyes that he had been drinking heavily. She did not resume her seat, but stood holding him with her eyes. In them, the man read contempt, and an angry flush mounted to his sallow cheek-bones.

"I reckon ye knows," went on the girl in the same steady voice, "thet Samson meant what he said when he warned ye ter stay away from hyar. I reckon ye knows I wouldn't never hev opened thet door, ef hit wasn't fer ye bein' in trouble."

The mountaineer straightened up, his eyes burning with the craftiness of drink, and the smoldering of resentment.

"I reckon I knows thet. Thet's why I said they was atter me. I hain't in no trouble, Sally. I jest come hyar ter see ye, thet's all."

Now, it was the girl's eyes that flashed anger. With quick steps, she reached the door, and threw it open. Her hand trembled as she pointed out into the night, and the gusty winter's breath caught and whipped her calico skirts about her ankles.

"You kin go!" she ordered, passionately. "Don't ye never cross this doorstep ag'in. Begone quick!"

But Tamarack only laughed with easy insolence.

"Sally," he drawled. "Thar's a-goin' ter be a dancin' party Christmas night over ter the Forks. I 'lowed I'd like ter hev ye go over thar with me."

Her voice was trembling with white-hot indignation.

"Didn't ye hear Samson say ye wasn't never ter speak ter me?"

"Ter hell with Samson!" he ripped out, furiously. "Nobody hain't pesterin' 'bout him. I don't allow Samson, ner no other man, ter dictate ter me who I keeps company with. I likes ye, Sally. Ye're the purtiest gal in the mountings, an'——"

"Will ye git out, or hev I got ter drive ye?" interrupted the girl. Her face paled, and her lips drew themselves into a taut line.

"Will ye go ter the party with me, Sally?" He came insolently over, and stood waiting, ignoring her dismissal with the ease of braggart effrontery. She, in turn, stood rigid, wordless, pointing his way across the doorstep. Slowly, the drunken face lost its leering grin. The eyes blackened into a truculent and venomous scowl. He stepped over, and stood towering above the slight figure, which did not give back a step before his advance. With an oath, he caught her savagely in his arms, and crushed her to him, while his unshaven, whiskey-soaked lips were pressed clingingly against her own indignant ones. Too astonished for struggle, the girl felt herself grow faint in his loathsome embrace, while to her ears came his panted words:

"I'll show ye. I wants ye, an' I'll git ye."

Adroitly, with a regained power of resistance and a lithe twist, she slipped out of his grasp, hammering at his face futilely with her clenched fists.

"I—I've got a notion ter kill ye!" she cried, brokenly. "Ef Samson was hyar, ye wouldn't dare—" What else she might have said was shut off in stormy, breathless gasps of humiliation and anger.

"Well," replied Tamarack, with drawling confidence, "ef Samson was hyar, I'd show him, too—damn him! But Samson hain't hyar. He won't never be hyar no more." His voice became deeply scornful, as he added: "He's done cut an' run. He's down thar below, consortin' with furriners, an' he hain't thinkin' nothin' 'bout you. You hain't good enough fer Samson, Sally. I tells ye he's done left ye fer all time."

Sally had backed away from the man, until she stood trembling near the hearth. As he spoke, Tamarack was slowly and step by step following her up. In his eyes glittered the same light that one sees in those of a cat which is watching a mouse already caught and crippled.

She half-reeled, and stood leaning against the rough stones of the fireplace. Her head was bowed, and her bosom heaving with emotion. She felt her knees weakening under her, and feared they would no longer support her. But, as her cousin ended, with a laugh, she turned her back to the wall, and stood with her downstretched hands groping against the logs. Then, she saw the evil glint in Tamarack's blood-shot eyes. He took one slow step forward, and held out his arms.

"Will ye come ter me?" he commanded, "or shall I come an' git ye?" The girl's fingers at that instant fell against something cooling and metallic. It was Samson's rifle.

With a sudden cry of restored confidence and a dangerous up-leaping of light in her eyes, she seized and cocked it.

CHAPTER XVI

THE girl stepped forward, and held the weapon finger on trigger, close to her cousin's chest.

"Ye lies, Tam'rack," she said, in a very low and steady voice—a voice that could not be mistaken, a voice relentlessly resolute and purposeful.

"Ye lies like ye always lies. Yore heart's black an' dirty. Ye're a murderer an' a coward. Samson's a-comin' back ter me. . . . I'm a-goin' ter be Samson's wife." The tensity of her earnestness might have told a subtler psychologist than Tamarack that she was endeavoring to convince herself. "He hain't never run away. He's hyar in this room right now." The mountaineer started, and cast an apprehensive glance about him. The girl laughed, with a deeply bitter note, then she went on:

"Oh, you can't see him, Tam'rack. Ye mout hunt all night, but wharever I be, Samson's thar, too. I hain't nothin' but a part of Samson—an' I'm mighty nigh ter killin' ye this minute—he'd do hit, I reckon."

"Come on now, Sally," urged the man, ingratiatingly. He was thoroughly cowed, seeking compromise. A fool woman with a gun: every one knew it was a dangerous combination, and, except for himself, no South had ever been a coward. He knew a certain glitter in their eyes. He knew it was apt to presage death, and this girl, trembling in her knees but holding that muzzle against his chest so unwaveringly, as steady as granite, had it in her pupils. Her voice held an inexorable monotony suggestive of tolling bells. She was not the Sally he had known before, but a new Sally, acting under a quiet sort of exaltation, capable of anything. He knew that, should she shoot him dead there in her house, no man who knew them both would blame her. His life depended on strategy. "Come on, Sally," he whined, as his face grew ashen. "I didn't aim ter make ye mad. I jest lost my head, an' made love ter ye. Hit hain't no sin ter kiss a feller's own cousin." He was edging toward the door.

"Stand where ye're at," ordered Sally, in a voice of utter loathing, and he halted. "Hit wasn't jest kissin' me—" She broke off, and shuddered again. "I said thet Samson was in this here room. Ef ye moves twell I tells ye ye kin, ye'll hear him speak ter ye, an' ef he speaks ye won't never hear nothin' more. This here is Samson's gun. I reckon he'll tell me ter pull the trigger terectly!"

"Fer God's sake, Sally!" implored the braggart. "Fer God's sake, look over what I done. I knows ye're Samson's gal. I——"

"Shet up!" she said, quietly; and his voice died instantly.

"Yes, I'm Samson's gal, an' I hain't a-goin' ter kill ye this time, Tam'rack, unlessen ye makes me do hit. But, ef ever ye crosses that stile out thar ag'in, so help me God, this gun air goin' ter shoot."

Tamarack licked his lips. They had grown dry. He had groveled before a girl—but he was to be spared. That was the essential thing.

"I promises," he said, and turned, much sobered, to the door.

Sally stood for a while, listening until she heard the slopping hoof-beats of his retreat, then she dropped limply into the shaky shuck-bottomed chair, and sat staring straight ahead, with a dazed and almost mortal hurt in her eyes. It was a trance-like attitude, and the gesture with which she several times wiped her calico sleeve across the lips his kisses had defiled, seemed subconscious. At last, she spoke aloud, but in a far-away voice, shaking her head miserably.

"I reckon Tam'rack's right," she said. "Samson won't hardly come back. Why would he come back?"

* * * * * *

The normal human mind is a reservoir, which fills at a rate of speed regulated by the number and calibre of its feed pipes. Samson's mind had long been almost empty, and now from so many sources the waters of new things were rushing in upon it that under their pressure it must fill fast, or give away.

He was saved from hopeless complications of thought by a sanity which was willing to assimilate without too much effort to analyze. That belonged to the future. Just now, all was marvelous. What miracles around him were wrought out of golden virtue, and what out of brazen vice, did not as yet concern him. New worlds are not long new worlds. The boy from Misery was presently less bizarre to the eye than many of the unkempt bohemians he met in the life of the studios: men who quarreled garrulously over the end and aim of Art, which they spelled with a capital A—and, for the most part, knew nothing of. He retained, except within a small circle of intimates, a silence that passed for taciturnity, and a solemnity of visage that was often construed into surly egotism.

He still wore his hair long, and, though his conversation gradually sloughed off much of its idiom and vulgarism, enough of the mountaineer stood out to lend to his personality a savor of the crudely picturesque.

Meanwhile, he drew and read and studied and walked and every day's advancement was a forced march. The things that he drew began by degrees to resolve themselves into some faint similitude to the things from which he drew them. The stick of charcoal no longer insisted on leaving in the wake of its stroke smears like soot. It began to be governable. But it was the fact that Samson saw things as they were and insisted on trying to draw them just as he saw them, which best pleased his sponsor. During those initial months, except for his long tramps, occupied with thoughts of the hills and the Widow Miller's cabin, his life lay between Lescott's studio and the cheap lodgings which he had taken near by. Sometimes while he was bending toward his easel there would rise before his imagination the dark unshaven countenance of Jim Asberry. At such moments, he would lay down the charcoal, and his eyes would cloud into implacable hatred. "I hain't fergot ye, Pap," he would mutter, with the fervor of a renewed vow. With the speed of a clock's minute hand, too gradual to be seen by the eye, yet so fast that it soon circles the dial, changes were being wrought in the raw material called Samson South. One thing did not change. In every crowd, he found himself searching hungrily for the face of Sally, which he knew he could not find. Always, there was the unadmitted, yet haunting, sense of his own rawness. For life was taking off his rough edges—and there were many—and life went about the process in workmanlike fashion, with sandpaper. The process was not enjoyable, and, though the man's soul was made fitter, it was also rubbed raw. Lescott, tremendously interested in his experiment, began to fear that the boy's too great somberness of disposition would defeat the very earnestness from which it sprang. So, one morning, the landscape-maker went to the telephone, and called for the number of a friend whom he rightly believed to be the wisest man, and the greatest humorist, in New York. The call brought no response, and the painter dried his brushes, and turned up Fifth Avenue to an apartment hotel in a cross street, where on a certain door he rapped with all the elaborate formula of a secret code. Very cautiously, the door opened, and revealed a stout man with a humorous, clean-shaven face. On a table lay a scattered sheaf of rough and yellow paper, penciled over in a cramped and interlined hand. The stout man's thinning hair was rumpled over a perspiring forehead. Across the carpet was a worn stretch that bespoke much midnight pacing. The signs were those of authorship.

"Why didn't you answer your 'phone?" smiled Lescott, though he knew.

The stout man shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the wall, where the disconnected receiver was hanging down. "Necessary precaution against creditors," he explained. "I am out—except to you."

"Busy?" interrogated Lescott. "You seem to have a manuscript in the making."

"No." The stout man's face clouded with black foreboding. "I shall never write another story. I'm played out." He turned, and restively paced the worn carpet, pausing at the window for a despondent glance across the roofs and chimney pots of the city. Lescott, with the privilege of intimacy, filled his pipe from the writer's tobacco jar.

"I want your help. I want you to meet a friend of mine, and take him under your wing in a fashion. He needs you."

The stout man's face again clouded. A few years ago, he had been peddling his manuscripts with the heart-sickness of unsuccessful middle age. To-day, men coupled his name with those of Kipling and De Maupassant. One of his antipathies was meeting people who sought to lionize him. Lescott read the expression, and, before his host had time to object, swept into his recital.

At the end he summarized:

"The artist is much like the setter-pup. If it's in him, it's as instinctive as a dog's nose. But to become efficient he must go a-field with a steady veteran of his own breed."

"I know!" The great man, who was also the simple man, smiled reminiscently. "They tried to teach me to herd sheep when my nose was itching for bird country. Bring on your man; I want to know him."

Samson was told nothing of the benevolent conspiracy, but one evening shortly later he found himself sitting at a café table with his sponsor and a stout man, almost as silent as himself. The stout man responded with something like churlish taciturnity to the half-dozen men and women who came over with flatteries. But later, when the trio was left alone, his face brightened, and he turned to the boy from Misery.

"Does Billy Conrad still keep store at Stagbone?"

Samson started, and his gaze fell in amazement. At the mention of the name, he saw a cross-roads store, with rough mules hitched to fence palings. It was a picture of home, and here was a man who had been there! With glowing eyes, the boy dropped unconsciously back into the vernacular of the hills.

"Hev ye been thar, stranger?"

The writer nodded, and sipped his whiskey.

"Not for some years, though," he confessed, as he drifted into reminiscence, which to Samson was like water to a parched throat.

When they left the café, the boy felt as though he were taking leave of an old and tried friend. By homely methods, this unerring diagnostician of the human soul had been reading him, liking him, and making him feel a heart-warming sympathy. The man who shrunk from lion-hunters, and who could return the churl's answer to the advances of sycophant and flatterer, enthusiastically poured out for the ungainly mountain boy all the rare quality and bouquet of his seasoned personal charm. It was a vintage distilled from experience and humanity. It had met the ancient requirement for the mellowing and perfecting of good Madeira, that it shall "voyage twice around the world's circumference," and it was a thing reserved for his friends.

"It's funny," commented the boy, when he and Lescott were alone, "that he's been to Stagbone."

"My dear Samson," Lescott assured him, "if you had spoken of Tucson, Arizona, or Caracas or Saskatchewan, it would have been the same. He knows them all."

It was not until much later that Samson realized how these two really great men had adopted him as their "little brother," that he might have their shoulder-touch to march by. And it was without his realization, too, that they laid upon him the imprint of their own characters and philosophy. One night at Tonelli's table-d'hôte place, the latest diners were beginning to drift out into Tenth Street. The faded soprano, who had in better days sung before a King, was wearying as she reeled out ragtime with a strong Neapolitan accent. Samson had been talking to the short-story writer about his ambitions and his hatreds. He feared he was drifting away from his destiny—and that he would in the end become too softened. The writer leaned across the table, and smiled.

"Fighting is all right," he said; "but a man should not be just the fighter." He mused a moment in silence, then quoted a scrap of verse:

" 'Test of the man, if his worth be,
  " 'In accord with the ultimate plan,
" 'That he be not, to his marring,
  " 'Always and utterly man;
" 'That he bring out of the battle
  " 'Fitter and undefiled,
" 'To woman the heart of a woman,
  " 'To children the heart of a child.' "

Samson South offered no criticism. He had known life from the stoic's view-point. He had heard the seductive call of artistic yearnings. Now, it dawned on him in an intensely personal fashion, as it had begun already to dawn in theory, that the warrior and the artist may meet on common and compatible ground, where the fighting spirit is touched and knighted with the gentleness of chivalry. He seemed to be looking from a new and higher plane, from which he could see a mellow softness on angles that had hitherto been only stern and unrelieved.

CHAPTER XVII

"I HAVE come, not to quarrel with you, but to try to dissuade you." The Honorable Mr. Wickliffe bit savagely at his cigar, and gave a despairing spread to his well-manicured hands. "You stand in danger of becoming the most cordially hated man in New York—hated by the most powerful combinations in New York."

Wilfred Horton leaned back in a swivel chair, and put his feet up on his desk. For a while, he seemed interested in his own silk socks.

"It's very kind of you to warn me," he said, quietly.

The Honorable Mr. Wickliffe rose in exasperation, and paced the floor. The smoke from his black cigar went before him in vicious puffs. Finally, he stopped, and leaned glaring on the table.

"Your family has always been conservative. When you succeeded to the fortune, you showed no symptoms of this mania. In God's name, what has changed you?"

"I hope I have grown up," explained the young man, with an unruffled smile. "One can't wear swaddling clothes forever, you know."

The attorney for an instant softened his manner as he looked into the straight-gazing, unafraid eyes of his client.

"I've known you from your babyhood. I advised your father before you were born. You have, by the chance of birth, come into the control of great wealth. The world of finance is of delicate balance. Squabbles in certain directorates may throw the Street into panic. Suddenly, you emerge from decent quiet, and run amuck in the china-shop, bellowing and tossing your horns. You make war on those whose interests are your own. You seem bent on hari-kari. You have toys enough to amuse you. Why couldn't you stay put?"

"They weren't the right things. They were, as you say, toys." The smile faded and Horton's chin set itself for a moment, as he added:

"If you don't think I'm going to stay put—watch me."

"Why do you have to make war—to be chronically insurgent?"

"Because"—the young man, who had waked up, spoke slowly—"I am reading a certain writing on the wall. The time is not far off when, unless we regulate a number of matters from within, we shall be regulated from without. Then, instead of giving the financial body a little griping in its gold-lined tummy, which is only the salutary effect of purging, a surgical operation will be required. It will be something like one they performed on the body politic of France not so long ago. Old Dr. Guillotine officiated. It was quite a successful operation, though the patient failed to rally."

"Take for instance this newspaper war you've inaugurated on the police," grumbled the corporation lawyer. "It's less dangerous to the public than these financial crusades, but decidedly more so for yourself. You are regarded as a dangerous agitator, a marplot! I tell you, Wilfred, aside from all other considerations the thing is perilous to yourself. You are riding for a fall. These men whom you are whipping out of public life will turn on you."

"So I hear. Here's a letter I got this morning—unsigned. That is, I thought it was here. Well, no matter. It warns me that I have less than three months to live unless I call off my dogs."

The Honorable Mr. Wickliffe's face mirrored alarm.

"Let me have it," he demanded. "You shouldn't treat such matters lightly. Men are assassinated in New York. I'll refer it to the police."

Horton laughed.

"That would be in the nature of referring back, wouldn't it? I fancy it came from some one not so remote from police sympathy."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to stay put. If I can convict certain corrupt members of the department, I'm going to nail brass-buttoned hides all over the front of the city hall."

"Have you had any other threats?"

"No, not exactly, but I've had more touching recognition than that. I've been asked to resign from several very good clubs."

The attorney groaned.

"You will be a Pariah. So will your allies."

It is said that the new convert is ever the most extreme fanatic. Wilfred Horton had promised to put on his working clothes, and he had done it with reckless disregard for consequences. At first, he was simply obeying Adrienne's orders; but soon he found himself playing the game for the game's sake. Men at the clubs and women whom he took into dinner chaffed him over his sudden disposition to try his wings. He was a man riding a hobby, they said. In time, it began to dawn that he, with others, whom he had drawn to his standards, meant serious war on certain complacent evils in the world of finance and politics. Sleeping dogs of custom began to stir and growl. Political overlords, assailed as unfaithful servants, showed their teeth. From some hidden, but unfailing, source terribly sure and direct evidence of guilt was being gathered. For Wilfred Horton, who was demanding a day of reckoning and spending great sums of money to get it, there was a prospect of things doing.

Adrienne Lescott was in Europe. Soon, she would return, and Horton meant to show that he had not buried his talent.

* * * * * *

For eight months Samson's life had run in the steady ascent of gradual climbing, but, in the four months from the first of August to the first of December, the pace of his existence suddenly quickened. He left off drawing from plaster casts, and went into a life class. His shyness secretly haunted him. The nudity of the woman posing on the model throne, the sense of his own almost as naked ignorance, and the dread of the criticism to come, were all keen embarrassments upon him.

In this period, Samson had his first acquaintanceship with women, except those he had known from childhood —and his first acquaintanceship with the men who were not of his own art world. Of the women, he saw several sorts. There were the aproned and frowsy students, of uncertain age, who seemed to have no life except that which existed under studio skylights. There were, also, a few younger girls, who took their art life with less painful solemnity; and, of course, the models in the "partially draped" and the "altogether."

Tony Collasso was an Italian illustrator, who lodged and painted in studio-apartments in Washington Square, South. He had studied in the Julian School and the Beaux Arts, and wore a shock of dark curls, a Satanic black mustache, and an expression of Byronic melancholy. The melancholy, he explained to Samson, sprang from the necessity of commercializing his divine gift. His companions were various, numbering among them a group of those pygmy celebrities of whom one has never heard until by chance he meets them, and of whom their intimates speak as of immortals.

To Collasso's studio, Samson was called one night by telephone. He had sometimes gone there before to sit for an hour, chiefly as a listener, while the man from Sorrento bewailed fate with his coterie, and denounced all forms of government, over insipid Chianti. Sometimes, an equally melancholy friend in soiled linen and frayed clothes took up his violin, and, as he improvised, the noisy group would fall silent. At such moments, Samson would ride out on the waves of melody, and see again the velvet softness of the mountain night, with stars hanging intimately close, and hear the ripple of Misery and a voice for which he longed.

But, to-night, he entered the door to find himself in the midst of a gay and boisterous party. The room was already thickly fogged with smoke, and a dozen men and women, singing snatches of current airs, were interesting themselves over a chafing dish. The studio of Tony Collasso was of fair size, and adorned with many unframed paintings, chiefly his own, and a few good tapestries and bits of bric-à-brac variously jettisoned from the sea of life in which he had drifted. The crowd itself was typical. A few very minor writers and artists, a model or two, and several women who had thinking parts in current Broadway productions.

At eleven o'clock the guests of honor arrived in a taxicab. They were Mr. William Farbish and Miss Winifred Starr. Having come, as they explained, direct from the theater where Miss Starr danced in the first row, they were in evening dress. Samson mentally acknowledged, though, with instinctive disfavor for the pair, that both were, in a way, handsome. Collasso drew him aside to whisper importantly:

"Make yourself agreeable to Farbish. He is received in the most exclusive society, and is a connoisseur of art. He is a connoisseur in all things," added the Italian, with a meaning glance at the girl. "Farbish has lived everywhere," he ran on, "and, if he takes a fancy to you, he will put you up at the best clubs. I think I shall sell him a landscape."

The girl was talking rapidly and loudly. She had at once taken the center of the room, and her laughter rang in free and egotistical peals above the other voices.

"Come," said the host, "I shall present you."

The boy shook hands, gazing with his usual directness into the show-girl's large and deeply-penciled eyes. Farbish, standing at one side with his hands in his pockets, looked on with an air of slightly bored detachment.

His dress, his mannerisms, his bearing, were all those of the man who has overstudied his part. They were too perfect, too obviously rehearsed through years of social climbing, but that was a defect Samson was not yet prepared to recognize.

Some one had naïvely complimented Miss Starr on the leopard-skin cloak she had just thrown from her shapely shoulders, and she turned promptly and vivaciously to the flatterer.

"It is nice, isn't it?" she prattled. "It may look a little up-stage for a girl who hasn't got a line to read in the piece, but these days one must get the spot-light, or be a dead one. It reminds me of a little run-in I had with Graddy—he's our stage-director, you know." She paused, awaiting the invitation to proceed, and, having received it, went gaily forward. "I was ten minutes late, one day, for rehearsal, and Graddy came up with that sarcastic manner of his, and said: 'Miss Starr, I don't doubt you are a perfectly nice girl, and all that, but it rather gets my goat to figure out how, on a salary of fifteen dollars a week, you come to rehearsals in a million dollars' worth of clothes, riding in a limousine—*and* ten minutes late!'" She broke off with the eager little expression of awaiting applause, and, having been satisfied, she added: "I was afraid that wasn't going to get a laugh, after all."

She glanced inquiringly at Samson, who had not smiled, and who stood looking puzzled.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. South, from down South," she challenged.

"I guess I'm sort of like Mr. Graddy," said the boy, slowly. "I was just wondering how you do do it."

He spoke with perfect seriousness, and, after a moment, the girl broke into a prolonged peal of laughter.

"Oh, you are delicious!" she exclaimed. "If I could do the *ingénue* like that, believe me, I'd make some hit." She came over, and, laying a hand on each of the boy's shoulders, kissed him lightly on the cheek. "That's for a droll boy!" she said. "That's the best line I've heard pulled lately."

Farbish was smiling in quiet amusement. He tapped the mountaineer on the shoulder.

"I've heard George Lescott speak of you," he said, genially. "I've rather a fancy for being among the discoverers of men of talent. We must see more of each other."

Samson left the party early, and with a sense of disgust. It was, at the time of his departure, waxing more furious in its merriment. It seemed to him that nowhere among these people was a note of sincerity, and his thoughts went back to the parting at the stile, and the girl whose artlessness and courage were honest.

Several days later, Samson was alone in Lescott's studio. It was nearing twilight, and he had laid aside a volume of De Maupassant, whose simple power had beguiled him. The door opened, and he saw the figure of a woman on the threshold. The boy rose somewhat shyly from his seat, and stood looking at her. She was as richly dressed as Miss Starr had been, but there was the same difference as between the colors of the sunset sky and the exaggerated daubs of Collasso's landscape. She stood lithely straight, and her furs fell back from a throat as smooth and slenderly rounded as Sally's. Her cheeks were bright with the soft glow of perfect health, and her lips parted over teeth that were as sound and strong as they were decorative. This girl did not have to speak to give the boy the conviction that she was some one whom he must like. She stood at the door a moment, and then came forward with her hand outstretched.

"This is Mr. South, isn't it?" she asked, with a frank friendliness in her voice.

"Yes, ma'am, that's my name."

"I'm Adrienne Lescott," said the girl. "I thought I'd find my brother here. I stopped by to drive him up-town."

Samson had hesitatingly taken the gloved hand, and its grasp was firm and strong despite its ridiculous smallness.

"I reckon he'll be back presently." The boy was in doubt as to the proper procedure. This was Lescott's studio, and he was not certain whether or not it lay in his province to invite Lescott's sister to take possession of it. Possibly, he ought to withdraw. His ideas of social usages were very vague.

"Then, I think I'll wait," announced the girl. She threw off her fur coat, and took a seat before the open grate. The chair was large, and swallowed her up.

Samson wanted to look at her, and was afraid that this would be impolite. He realized that he had seen no real ladies, except on the street, and now he had the opportunity. She was beautiful, and there was something about her willowy grace of attitude that made the soft and clinging lines of her gown fall about her in charming drapery effects. Her small pumps and silk-stockinged ankles as she held them out toward the fire made him say to himself:

"I reckon she never went barefoot in her life."

"I'm glad of this chance to meet you, Mr. South," said the girl with a smile that found its way to the boy's heart. After all, there was sincerity in "foreign" women. "George talks of you so much that I feel as if I'd known you all the while. Don't you think I might claim friendship with George's friends?"

Samson had no answer. He wished to say something equally cordial, but the old instinct against effusiveness tied his tongue.

"I owe right smart to George Lescott," he told her, gravely.

"That's not answering my question," she laughed. "Do you consent to being friends with me?"

"Miss—" began the boy. Then, realizing that in New York this form of address is hardly complete, he hastened to add: "Miss Lescott, I've been here over nine months now, and I'm just beginning to realize what a rube I am. I haven't no—" Again, he broke off, and laughed at himself. "I mean, I haven't any idea of proper manners, and so I'm, as we would say down home, 'plumb skeered' of ladies."

As he accused himself, Samson was looking at her with unblinking directness; and she met his glance with eyes that twinkled.

"Mr. South," she said, "I know all about manners, and you know all about a hundred real things that I want to know. Suppose we begin teaching each other?"

Samson's face lighted with the revolutionizing effect that a smile can bring only to features customarily solemn.

"Miss Lescott," he said, "let's call that a trade—but you're gettin' all the worst of it. To start with, you might give me a lesson right now in how a feller ought to act, when he's talkin' to a lady—how I ought to act with you!"

Her laugh made the situation as easy as an old shoe.

Ten minutes later, Lescott entered.

"Well," he said, with a smile, "shall I introduce you people, or have you already done it for yourselves?"

"Oh," Adrienne assured him, "Mr. South and I are old friends." As she left the room, she turned and added: "The second lesson had better be at my house. If I telephone you some day when we can have the school-room to ourselves, will you come up?"

Samson grinned, and forgot to be bashful as he replied:

"I'll come a-kitin'!"

CHAPTER XVIII

EARLY that year, the touch of autumn came to the air. Often, returning at sundown from the afternoon life class, Samson felt the lure of its melancholy sweetness, and paused on one of the Washington Square benches, with many vague things stirring in his mind. Some of these things were as subtly intangible as the lazy sweetness that melted the façades of the walls into the soft colors of a dream city. He found himself loving the Palisades of Jersey, seen through a powdery glow at evening, and the red-gold glare of the setting sun on high-swung gilt signs. He felt with a throb of his pulses that he was in the Bagdad of the new world, and that every skyscraper was a minaret from which the muezzin rang toward the Mecca of his Art. He felt with a stronger throb the surety of young, but quickening, abilities within himself. Partly, it was the charm of Indian summer, partly a sense of growing with the days, but, also, though he had not as yet realized that, it was the new friendship into which Adrienne had admitted him, and the new experience of frank *camaraderie* with a woman not as a member of an inferior sex, but as an equal companion of brain and soul. He had seen her often, and usually alone, because he shunned meetings with strangers. Until his education had advanced further, he wished to avoid social embarrassments. He knew that she liked him, and realized that it was because he was a new and virile type, and for that reason a diversion—a sort of human novelty. She liked him, too, because it was rare for a man to offer her friendship without making love, and she was certain he would not make love. He liked her for the same many reasons that every one else did—because she was herself. Of late, too, he had met a number of men at Lescott's clubs. He was modestly surprised to find that, though his attitude on these occasions was always that of one sitting in the background, the men seemed to like him, and, when they said, "See you again," at parting, it was with the convincing manner of real friendliness. Sometimes, even now, his language was ungrammatical, but so, for the matter of that, was theirs. . . . The great writer smiled with his slow, humorous lighting of the eyes as he observed to Lescott:

"We are licking our cub into shape, George, and the best of it is that, when he learns to dance ragtime to the organ, he isn't going to stop being a bear. He's a grizzly!"

One wonderful afternoon in October, when the distances were mist-hung, and the skies very clear, Samson sat across the table from Adrienne Lescott at a roadhouse on the Sound. The sun had set through great cloud battalions massed against the west, and the horizon was fading into darkness through a haze like ash of roses. She had picked him up on the Avenue, and taken him into her car for a short spin, but the afternoon had beguiled them, luring them on a little further, and still a little further. When they were a score of miles from Manhattan, the car had suddenly broken down. It would, the chauffeur told them, be the matter of an hour to effect repairs, so the girl, explaining to the boy that this event gave the affair the aspect of adventure, turned and led the way, on foot, to the nearest road-house.

"We will telephone that we shall be late, and then have dinner," she laughed. "And for me to have dinner with you alone, unchaperoned at a country inn, is by New York standards delightfully unconventional. It borders on wickedness." Then, since their attitude toward each other was so friendly and innocent, they both laughed. They had dined under the trees of an old manor house, built a century ago, and now converted into an inn, and they had enjoyed themselves because it seemed to them pleasingly paradoxical that they should find in a place seemingly so shabby-genteel a *cuisine* and service of such excellence. Neither of them had ever been there before, and neither of them knew that the reputation of this establishment was in its own way wide—and unsavory. They had no way of knowing that, because of several thoroughly bruited scandals which had had origin here, it was a tabooed spot, except for persons who preferred a semi-shady retreat; and they passed over without suspicion the palpable surprise of the head waiter when they elected to occupy a table on the terrace instead of a *cabinet particulier*.

But the repairs did not go as smoothly as the chauffeur had expected, and, when he had finished, he was hungry. So, eleven o'clock found them still chatting at their table on the lighted lawn. After awhile, they fell silent, and Adrienne noticed that her companion's face had become deeply, almost painfully set, and that his gaze was tensely focused on herself.

"What is it, Mr. South?" she demanded.

The young man began to speak, in a steady, self-accusing voice.

"I was sitting here, looking at you," he said, bluntly. "I was thinking how fine you are in every way; how there is as much difference in the texture of men and women as there is in the texture of their clothes. From that automobile cap you wear to your slippers and stockings, you are clad in silk. From your brain to the tone of your voice, you are woven of human silk. I've learned lately that silk isn't weak, but strong. They make the best balloons of it." He paused and laughed, but his face again became sober. "I was thinking, too, of your mother. She must be sixty, but she's a young woman. Her face is smooth and unwrinkled, and her heart is still in bloom. At that same age, George won't be much older than he is now."

The compliment was so obviously not intended as compliment at all that the girl flushed with pleasure.

"Then," went on Samson, his face slowly drawing with pain, "I was thinking of my own people. My mother was about forty when she died. She was an old woman. My father was forty-three. He was an old man. I was thinking how they withered under their drudgery—and of the monstrous injustice of it all."

Adrienne Lescott nodded. Her eyes were sweetly sympathetic.

"It's the hardship of the conditions," she said, softly. "Those conditions will change."

"But that's not all I was thinking," went on the boy.

"I was watching you lift your coffee-cup awhile ago. You did it unconsciously, but your movement was dainty and graceful, as though an artist had posed you. That takes generations, and, in my imagination, I saw my people sitting around an oil-cloth on a kitchen table, pouring coffee into their saucers."

> " 'There are five and twenty ways
> " 'Of writing tribal lays,' "

quoted the girl, smilingly,

> " 'And every single one of them is right.' "

"And a horrible thought came to me," continued Samson. He took out his handkerchief, and mopped his forehead, then tossed back the long lock that fell over it. "I wondered"—he paused, and then went on with a set face—"I wondered if I were growing ashamed of my people."

"If I thought that," said Miss Lescott, quietly, "I wouldn't have much use for you. But I know there's no danger."

"If I thought there was," Samson assured her, "I would go back there to Misery, and shoot myself to death. . . . And, yet, the thought came to me."

"I'm not afraid of your being a cad," she repeated.

"And yet," he smiled, "I was trying to imagine you among my people. What was that rhyme you used to quote to me when you began to teach me manners?"

She laughed, and fell into nonsense quotation, as she thrummed lightly on the table-cloth with her slim fingers.

" 'The goops they lick their fingers,
" 'The goops eat with their knives,
" 'They spill their broth on the table-cloth,
" 'And lead disgusting lives.' "

"My people do all those things," announced Samson, though he said it rather in a manner of challenge than apology, "except spilling their broth on the table-cloth. . . . There are no table-cloths. What would you do in such company?"

"I," announced Miss Lescott, promptly, "should also lick my fingers."

Samson laughed, and looked up. A man had come out onto the verandah from the inside, and was approaching the table. He was immaculately groomed, and came forward with the deference of approaching a throne, yet as one accustomed to approaching thrones. His smile was that of pleased surprise.

The mountaineer recognized Farbish, and, with a quick hardening of the face, he recalled their last meeting. If Farbish should presume to renew the acquaintanceship under these circumstances, Samson meant to rise from his chair, and strike him in the face. George Lescott's sister could not be subjected to such meetings. Yet, it was a tribute to his advancement in good manners that he dreaded making a scene in he presence, and, as a warning, he met Farbish's pleasant smile with a look of blank and studied lack of recognition. The circumstances out of which Farbish might weave unpleasant gossip did not occur to Samson. That they were together late in the evening, unchaperoned, at a road-house whose reputation was socially dubious, was a thing he did not realize. But Farbish was keenly alive to the possibilities of the situation. He chose to construe the Kentuckian's blank expression as annoyance at being discovered, a sentiment he could readily understand. Adrienne Lescott, following her companion's eyes, looked up, and to the boy's astonishment nodded to the new-comer, and called him by name.

"Mr. Farbish," she laughed, with mock confusion and total innocence of the fact that her words might have meaning, "don't tell on us."

"I never tell things, my dear lady," said the new-comer. "I have dwelt too long in conservatories to toss pebbles. I'm afraid, Mr. South, you have forgotten me. I'm Farbish, and I had the pleasure of meeting you"—he paused a moment, then with a pointed glance added—"at the Manhattan Club, was it not?"

"It was not," said Samson, promptly. Farbish looked his surprise, but was resolved to see no offense, and, after a few moments of affable and, it must be acknowledged, witty conversation, withdrew to his own table.

"Where did you meet that man?" demanded Samson, fiercely, when he and the girl were alone again.

"Oh, at any number of dinners and dances. His sort is tolerated for some reason." She paused, then, looking very directly at the Kentuckian, inquired, "And where did you meet him?"

"Didn't you hear him say the Manhattan Club?"

"Yes, and I knew that he was lying."

"Yes, he was!" Samson spoke, contemptuously. "Never mind where it was. It was a place I got out of when I found out who were there."

The chauffeur came to announce that the car was ready, and they went out. Farbish watched them with a smile that had in it a trace of the sardonic.

The career of Farbish had been an interesting one in its own peculiar and unadmirable fashion. With no advantages of upbringing, he had nevertheless so cultivated the niceties of social usage that his one flaw was a too great perfection. He was letter-perfect where one to the manor born might have slurred some detail.

He was witty, handsome in his saturnine way, and had powerful friends in the world of fashion and finance. That he rendered services to his plutocratic patrons, other than the repartee of his dinner talk, was a thing vaguely hinted in club gossip, and that these services were not to his credit had more than once been conjectured.

When Horton had begun his crusade against various abuses, he had cast a suspicious eye on all matters through which he could trace the trail of William Farbish, and now, when Farbish saw Horton, he eyed him with an enigmatical expression, half-quizzical and half-malevolent.

After Adrienne and Samson had disappeared, he rejoined his companion, a stout, middle-aged gentleman of florid complexion, whose cheviot cutaway and reposeful waistcoat covered a liberal embonpoint. Farbish took his cigar from his lips, and studied its ascending smoke through lids half-closed and thoughtful.

"Singular," he mused; "very singular!"

"What's singular?" impatiently demanded his companion. "Finish, or don't start."

"That mountaineer came up here as George Lescott's protégé," went on Farbish, reflectively. "He came fresh from the feud belt, and landed promptly in the police court. Now, in less than a year, he's pairing off with Adrienne Lescott—who, every one supposed, meant to marry Wilfred Horton. This little party to-night is, to put it quite mildly, a bit unconventional."

The stout gentleman said nothing, and the other questioned, musingly:

"By the way, Bradburn, has the Kenmore Shooting Club requested Wilfred Horton's resignation yet?"

"Not yet. We are going to. He's not congenial, since his hand is raised against every man who owns more than two dollars." The speaker owned several million times that sum. This meeting at an out-of-the-way place had been arranged for the purpose of discussing ways and means of curbing Wilfred's crusades.

"Well, don't do it."

"Why the devil shouldn't we? We don't want anarchists in the Kenmore."

After awhile, they sat silent, Farbish smiling over the plot he had just devised, and the other man puffing with a puzzled expression at his cigar.

"That's all there is to it," summarized Mr. Farbish, succinctly. "If we can get these two men, South and Horton, together down there at the shooting lodge, under the proper conditions, they'll do the rest themselves, I think. I'll take care of South. Now, it's up to you to have Horton there at the same time."

"How do you know these two men have not already met—and amicably?" demanded Mr. Bradburn.

"I happen to know it, quite by chance. It is my business to know things—quite by chance!"

CHAPTER XIX

INDIAN summer came again to Misery, flaunting woodland banners of crimson and scarlet and orange, but to Sally the season brought only heartachy remembrances of last autumn, when Samson had softened his stoicism as the haze had softened the horizon. He had sent her a few brief letters—not written, but plainly printed. He selected short words—as much like the primer as possible, for no other messages could she read. There were times in plenty when he wished to pour out to her torrents of feeling, and it was such feeling as would have carried comfort to her lonely little heart. He wished to tell frankly of what a good friend he had made, and how this friendship made him more able to realize that other feeling—his love for Sally. There was in his mind no suspicion—as yet—that these two girls might ever stand in conflict as to right-of-way. But the letters he wished to write were not the sort he cared to have read to the girl by the evangelist-doctor or the district-school teacher, and alone she could have made nothing of them. However, "I love you" are easy words—and those he always included.

The Widow Miller had been ailing for months, and, though the local physician diagnosed the condition as being "right porely," he knew that the specter of tuberculosis which stalks through these badly lighted and ventilated houses was stretching out its fingers to touch

THE CLAN OF SOUTHS

her shrunken chest. This had meant that Sally had to forego the evening hours of study, because of the weariness that followed the day of nursing and household drudgery. Autumn seemed to bring to her mother a slight improvement, and Sally could again sometimes steal away with her slate and book, to sit alone on the big bowlder, and study. But, oftentimes, the print on the page, or the scrawl on the slate, became blurred. Nowadays, the tears came weakly to her eyes, and, instead of hating herself for them and dashing them fiercely away, as she would have done a year ago, she sat listlessly, and gazed across the flaring hills.

Even the tuneful glory of the burgundy and scarlet mountains hurt her into wincing—for was it not the clarion of Beauty that Samson had heard—and in answer to which he had left her? So, she would sit, and let her eyes wander, and try to imagine the sort of picture those same very hungry eyes would see, could she rip away the curtain of purple distance, and look in on him—wherever he was. And, in imagining such a picture, she was hampered by no actual knowledge of the world in which he lived—it was all a fairy-tale world, one which her imagination shaped and colored fantastically. Then, she would take out one of his occasional letters, and her face would grow somewhat rapt, as she spelled out the familiar, "I love you," which was to her the soul of the message. The rest was unimportant. She would not be able to write that Christmas letter. There had been too many interruptions in the self-imparted education, but some day she would write. There would probably be time enough. It would take even Samson a long while to become an artist. He had said so, and the morbid mountain pride forbade that she should write at all until she could do it well enough to give him a complete surprise. It must be a finished article, that letter—or nothing at all!

One day, as she was walking homeward from her lonely trysting place, she met the battered-looking man who carried medicines in his saddlebags and the Scriptures in his pocket, and who practised both forms of healing through the hills. The old man drew down his nag, and threw one leg over the pommel.

"Evenin', Sally," he greeted.

"Evenin', Brother Spencer. How air ye?"

"Tol'able, thank ye, Sally." The body-and-soul mender studied the girl awhile in silence, and then said bluntly:

"Ye've done broke right smart, in the last year. Anything the matter with ye?"

She shook her head, and laughed. It was an effort to laugh merrily, but only the ghost of the old instinctive blitheness rippled into it.

"I've jest come from old Spicer South's," volunteered the doctor. "He's ailin' pretty consid'able, these days."

"What's the matter with Unc' Spicer?" demanded the girl, in genuine anxiety. Every one along Misery called the old man Unc' Spicer.

"I can't jest make out." Her informer spoke slowly, and his brow corrugated into something like sullenness. "He hain't jest to say sick. Thet is, his organs seems all right, but he don't 'pear to have no heart fer nothin', and his victuals don't tempt him none. He's jest puny, thet's all."

"I'll go over thar, an' see him," announced the girl. "I'll cook a chicken thet'll tempt him."

The physician's mind was working along some line which did not seem to partake of cheerfulness. Again, he studied the girl, still upright and high-chinned, but, somehow, no longer effervescent with wild, resilient strength.

"Hit sometimes 'pears to me," he said, gruffly, "thet this here thing of eddication costs a sight more than hit comes to."

"What d'ye mean, Brother Spencer?"

"I reckon if Samson South hadn't a-took this hyar hankerin' atter larnin', an' had stayed home 'stid of rainbow chasin', the old man would still be able-bodied, 'stid of dyin' of a broken heart—an' you——"

The girl's cheeks flushed. Her violet eyes became deep with a loyal and defensive glow.

"Ye mustn't say things like them, Brother Spencer." Her voice was very firm and soft. "Unc' Spicer's jest gettin' old, an' es fer me, I wasn't never better ner happier in my life." It was a lie, but a splendid lie, and she told herself as well as Brother Spencer that she believed it. "Samson would come back in a minit ef we sent fer him. He's smart, an' he's got a right ter l'arnin'! He hain't like us folks; he's a—" She paused, and groped for the word that Lescott had added to her vocabulary, which she had half-forgotten. "He's a genius!"

There rose to the lips of the itinerant preacher a sentiment as to how much more loyalty availeth a man than genius, but, as he looked at the slender and valiant figure standing in the deep dust of the road, he left it unuttered.

The girl spent much time after that at the house of old Spicer South, and her coming seemed to waken him into a fitful return of spirits. His strength, which had been like the strength of an ox, had gone from him, and he spent his hours sitting listlessly in a split-bottomed rocker, which was moved from place to place, following the sunshine.

"I reckon, Unc' Spicer," suggested the girl, on one of her first visits, "I'd better send fer Samson. Mebby hit mout do ye good ter see him."

The old man was weakly leaning back in his chair, and his eyes were vacantly listless; but, at the suggestion, he straightened, and the ancient fire came again to his face.

"Don't ye do hit," he exclaimed, almost fiercely. "I knows ye means hit kindly, Sally, but don't ye meddle in my business."

"I—I didn't 'low ter meddle," faltered the girl.

"No, little gal." His voice softened at once into gentleness. "I knows ye didn't. I didn't mean ter be short-answered with ye neither, but thar's jest one thing I won't 'low nobody ter do—an' thet's ter send fer Samson. He knows the road home, an', when he wants ter come, he'll find the door open, but we hain't a-goin' ter send atter him."

The girl said nothing, and, after awhile, the old man went on:

"I wants ye ter understand me, Sally. Hit hain't that I'm mad with Samson. God knows, I loves the boy. . . . I hain't a-blamin' him, neither. . . ."

He was silent for awhile, and his words came with the weariness of dead hopes when he began again. "Mebby, I oughtn't ter talk about sech things with a young gal, but I'm an old man, an' thar hain't no harm in hit. . . . From the time when I used ter watch you two children go a-trapsin' off in the woods together atter hickory nuts, thar's been jest one thing thet I've looked forward to and dreamed about: I wanted ter see ye married. I 'lowed—" A mistiness quenched the sternness of his gray eyes. "I 'lowed thet, ef I could see yore children playin' round this here yard, everything thet's ever gone wrong would be paid fer."

Sally stood silently at his side, and her cheeks flushed as the tears crept into her eyes; but her hand stole through the thick mane of hair, fast turning from iron-gray to snow-white.

Spicer South watched the fattening hog that rubbed its bristling side against the rails stacked outside the fence, and then said, with an imperious tone that did not admit of misconstruction:

"But, Sally, the boy's done started out on his own row. He's got ter hoe hit. Mebby he'll come back—mebby not! Thet's as the Lord wills. Hit wouldn't do us no good fer him to come withouten he come willin'ly. The meanest thing ye could do ter me—an' him—would be ter send fer him. Ye mustn't do hit. Ye mustn't!"

"All right, Unc' Spicer. I hain't a-goin' ter do hit—leastways, not yit. But I'm a-goin' ter come over hyar every day ter see ye."

"Ye can't come too often, Sally, gal," declared the old clansman, heartily.

* * * * * *

Wilfred Horton found himself that fall in the position of a man whose course lies through rapids, and for the first time in his life his pleasures were giving precedence to business. He knew that his efficiency would depend on maintaining the physical balance of perfect health and fitness, and early each morning he went for his gallop in the park. At so early an hour, he had the bridle path for the most part to himself. This had its compensations, for, though Wilfred Horton continued to smile with his old-time good humor, he acknowledged to himself that it was not pleasant to have men who had previously sought him out with flatteries avert their faces, and pretend that they had not seen him.

Horton was the most-hated and most-admired man in New York, but the men who hated and snubbed him were his own sort, and the men who admired him were those whom he would never meet, and who knew him only through the columns of penny papers. Their sympathy was too remote to bring him explicit pleasure. He was merely attempting, from within, reforms which the public and the courts had attempted from without. But, since he operated from within the walls, he was denounced as a Judas. Powerful enemies had ceased to laugh, and begun to conspire. He must be silenced! How, was a mooted question. But, in some fashion, he must be silenced. Society had not cast him out, but Society had shown him in many subtle ways that he was no longer her favorite. He had taken a plebeian stand with the masses. Meanwhile, from various sources, Horton had received warnings of actual personal danger. But at these he had laughed, and no hint of them had reached Adrienne's ears.

One evening, when business had forced the postponement of a dinner engagement with Miss Lescott, he begged her over the telephone to ride with him the following morning.

"I know you are usually asleep when I'm out and galloping," he laughed, "but you pitched me neck and crop into this hurly-burly, and I shouldn't have to lose everything. Don't have your horse brought. I want you to try out a new one of mine."

"I think," she answered, "that early morning is the best time to ride. I'll meet you at seven at the Plaza entrance."

They had turned the upper end of the reservoir before Horton drew his mount to a walk, and allowed the reins to hang. They had been galloping hard, and conversation had been impracticable.

"I suppose experience should have taught me," began Horton, slowly, "that the most asinine thing in the world is to try to lecture you, Drennie. But there are times when one must even risk your delight at one's discomfiture."

"I'm not going to tease you this morning," she answered, docilely. "I like the horse too well—and, to be frank, I like you too well!"

"Thank you," smiled Horton. "As usual, you disarm me on the verge of combat. I had nerved myself for ridicule."

"What have I done now?" inquired the girl, with an innocence which further disarmed him.

"The Queen can do no wrong. But even the Queen, perhaps more particularly the Queen, must give thought to what people are saying."

"What are people saying?"

"The usual unjust things that are said about women in society. You are being constantly seen with an uncouth freak who is scarcely a gentleman, however much he may be a man. And malicious tongues are wagging."

The girl stiffened.

"I won't spar with you. I know that you are alluding to Samson South, though the description is a slander. I never thought it would be necessary to say such a thing to you, Wilfred, but you are talking like a cad."

The young man flushed.

"I laid myself open to that," he said, slowly, "and I suppose I should have expected it."

He knew her well enough to dread the calmness of her more serious anger, and just now the tilt of her chin, the ominous light of her deep eyes and the quality of her voice told him that he had incurred it.

"May I ask," Adrienne inquired, "what you fancy constitutes your right to assume this censorship of my conduct?"

"I have no censorship, of course. I have only the interest of loving you, and meaning to marry you."

"And I may remark in passing, that you are making no progress to that end by slandering my friends."

"Adrienne, I'm not slandering. God knows I hate cads and snobs. Mr. South is simply, as yet, uncivilized. Otherwise, he would hardly take you, unchaperoned, to—well, let us say to ultra-bohemian resorts, where you are seen by such gossip-mongers as William Farbish.

"So, that's the specific charge, is it?"

"Yes, that's the specific charge. Mr. South may be a man of unusual talent and strength. But—he has done what no other man has done—with you. He has caused club gossip, which may easily be twisted and misconstrued."

"Do you fancy that Samson South could have taken me to the Wigwam Road-house if I had not cared to go with him?"

The man shook his head.

"Certainly not! But the fact that you did care to go with him indicates an influence over you which is new. You have not sought the bohemian and unconventional phases of life with your other friends."

Adrienne glanced at the athletic figure riding at her side, just now rather rigid with restraint and indignation, as though his vertebræ were threaded on a ramrod, and her eyes darkened a little.

"Now, let it be thoroughly understood between us, Wilfred," she said very quietly, "that if you see any danger in my unconventionalities, I don't care to discuss this, or any other matter, with you now or at any time." She paused, then added in a more friendly voice: "It would be rather a pity for us to quarrel about a thing like this."

The young man was still looking into her eyes, and he read there an ultimatum.

"God knows I was not questioning you," he replied, slowly. "There is no price under heaven I would not pay for your regard. None the less, I repeat that, at the present moment, I can see only two definitions for this mountaineer. Either he is a bounder, or else he is so densely ignorant and churlish that he is unfit to associate with you."

"I make no apologies for Mr. South," she said, "because none are needed. He is a stranger in New York, who knows nothing, and cares nothing about the conventionalities. If I chose to waive them, I think it was my right and my responsibility."

Horton said nothing, and, in a moment, Adrienne Lescott's manner changed. She spoke more gently:

"Wilfred, I'm sorry you choose to take this prejudice against the boy. You could have done a great deal to help him. I wanted you to be friends."

"Thank you!" His manner was stiff. "I hardly think we'd hit it off together."

"I don't think you quite understand," she argued. "Samson South is running a clean, creditable race, weighted down with a burdensome handicap. As a straight-thinking sportsman, if for no better reason, I should fancy you'd be glad to help him. He has the stamina and endurance."

"Those," said Horton, who at heart was the fairest and most generous of men, "are very admirable qualities. Perhaps, I should be more enthusiastic, Drennie, if you were a little less so."

For the first time since the talk had so narrowly skirted a quarrel, her eyes twinkled.

"I believe you are jealous!" she announced.

"Of course, I'm jealous," he replied, without evasion. "Possibly, I might have saved time in the first place by avowing my jealousy. I hasten now to make amends. I'm green-eyed."

She laid her gloved fingers lightly on his bridle hand.

"Don't be," she advised; "I'm not in love with him. If I were, it wouldn't matter. He has

" 'A neater, sweeter maiden,
" 'In a greener, cleaner land.'

He's told me all about her."

Horton shook his head, dubiously.

"I wish to the good Lord, he'd go back to her," he said. "This Platonic proposition is the doormat over which two persons walk to other things. They end by wiping their feet on the Platonic doormat."

"We'll cross that—that imaginary doormat, when we get to it," laughed the girl. "Meantime, you ought to help me with Samson."

"Thank you, no! I won't help educate my successor. And I won't abdicate"—his manner of speech grew suddenly tense—"while I can fight for my foothold."

"I haven't asked you to abdicate. This boy has been here less than a year. He came absolutely raw——"

"And lit all spraddled out in the police court!" Wilfred prompted.

"And, in less than a year, he has made wonderful advancement; such advancement as he could not have made but for one thing."

"Which was—that you took him in hand."

"No—which is, that he springs from stock that, despite its hundred years of lapse into illiteracy, is good stock. Samson South was a gentleman, Wilfred, two hundred years before he was born."

"That," observed her companion, curtly, "was some time ago."

She tossed her head, impatiently.

"Come," she said, "let's gallop."

"No," protested Wilfred, his face becoming penitent. "Just a moment! I retract. It is I who am the cad. Please, tell Mr. South just what we have both said, and make my apologies if he'll accept them. Of course, if you insist, I'll meet him. I suppose I'll have to meet him some day, anyhow. But, frankly, Drennie, I hate the man. It will take a Herculean effort to be decent to him. Still, if you say so——"

"No, Wilfred," she declined, "if you can't do it willingly, I don't want you to do it at all. It doesn't matter in the least. Let's drop the subject."

CHAPTER XX

ONE afternoon, swinging along Fifth Avenue in his down-town walk, Samson met Mr. Farbish, who fell into step with him, and began to make conversation.

"By the way, South," he suggested after the commonplaces had been disposed of, "you'll pardon my little prevarication the other evening about having met you at the Manhattan Club?"

"Why was it necessary?" inquired Samson, with a glance of disquieting directness.

"Possibly, it was not necessary, merely politic. Of course," he laughed, "every man knows two kinds of women. It's just as well not to discuss the nectarines with the orchids, or the orchids with the nectarines."

Samson made no response. But Farbish, meeting his eyes, felt as though he had been contemptuously rebuked. His own eyes clouded with an impulse of resentment. But it passed, as he remembered that his plans involved the necessity of winning this boy's confidence. An assumption of superior virtue, he thought, came rather illogically from Samson, who had brought to the inn a young woman whom he should not have exposed to comment. He, himself, could afford to be diplomatic. Accordingly, he laughed.

"You mustn't take me too literally, South," he explained. "The life here has a tendency to make us cynical in our speech, even though we may be quite the reverse in our practices. In point of fact, I fancy we were both rather out of our element at Collasso's studio."

At the steps of a Fifth Avenue club, Farbish halted.

"Won't you turn in here," he suggested, "and assuage your thirst?"

Samson declined, and walked on. But when, a day or two later, he dropped into the same club with George Lescott, Farbish joined them in the grill—without invitation.

"By the way, Lescott," said the interloper, with an easy assurance upon which the coolness of his reception had no seeming effect, "it won't be long now until ducks are flying south. Will you get off for your customary shooting?"

"I'm afraid not." Lescott's voice became more cordial, as a man's will whose hobby has been touched. "There are several canvases to be finished for approaching exhibitions. I wish I could go. When the first cold winds begin to sweep down, I get the fever. The prospects are good, too, I understand."

"The best in years! Protection in the Canadian breeding fields is bearing fruit. Do you shoot ducks, Mr. South?" The speaker included Samson as though merely out of deference to his physical presence.

Samson shook his head. But he was listening eagerly. He, too, knew that note of the migratory "honk" from high overhead.

"Samson," said Lescott slowly, as he caught the gleam in his friend's eyes, "you've been working too hard. You'll have to take a week off, and try your hand. After you've changed your method from rifle to shotgun, you'll bag your share, and you'll come back fitter for work. I must arrange it."

"As to that," suggested Farbish, in the manner of one regarding the civilities, "Mr. South can run down to the Kenmore. I'll have a card made out for him."

"Don't trouble," demurred Lescott, coolly, "I can fix that up."

"It would be a pleasure," smiled the other. "I sincerely wish I could be there at the same time, but I'm afraid that, like you, Lescott, I shall have to give business the right of way. However, when I hear that the flights are beginning, I'll call Mr. South up, and pass the news to him."

Samson had thought it rather singular that he had never met Horton at the Lescott house, though Adrienne spoke of him almost as of a member of the family. However, Samson's visits were usually in his intervals between relays of work and Horton was probably at such times in Wall Street. It did not occur to the mountaineer that the other was intentionally avoiding him. He knew of Wilfred only through Adrienne's eulogistic descriptions, and, from hearsay, liked him.

The months of close application to easel and books had begun to tell on the outdoor man in a softening of muscles and a slight, though noticeable, pallor. The enthusiasm with which he attacked his daily schedule carried him far, and made his progress phenomenal, but he was spending capital of nerve and health, and George Lescott began to fear a break-down for his protégé. Lescott did not want to advise a visit to the mountains, because he had secured from the boy a promise that, unless he was called home, he would give the experiment an unbroken trial of eighteen months.

If Samson went back, he feared his return would reawaken the sleeping volcano of the feud—and he could not easily come away again. He discussed the matter with Adrienne, and the girl began to promote in the boy an interest in the duck-shooting trip—an interest which had already awakened, despite the rifleman's inherent contempt for shotguns.

"You will be in your blind," she enthusiastically told him, "before daybreak, and after a while the wedges will come flying into view, cutting the fog in hundreds and dropping into the decoys. You'll love it! I wish I were going myself."

"Do you shoot?" he asked, in some surprise.

She nodded, and added modestly:

"But I don't kill many ducks."

"Is there anything you can't do?" he questioned in admiration, then demanded, with the touch of homesickness in his voice, "Are there any mountains down there?"

"I'm afraid we can't provide any mountains," laughed Adrienne. "Just salt marshes—and beyond them, the sea. But there's moonshine—of the natural variety—and a tonic in the wind that buffets you."

"I reckon I'd like it, all right," he said, "and I'll bring you back some ducks, if I'm lucky."

So, Lescott arranged the outfit, and Samson awaited the news of the coming flights.

That same evening, Farbish dropped into the studio, explaining that he had been buying a picture at Collasso's, and had taken the opportunity to stop by and hand Samson a visitor's card to the Kenmore Club.

He found the ground of interest fallow, and artfully sowed it with well-chosen anecdotes calculated to stimulate enthusiasm.

On leaving the studio, he paused to say:

"I'll let you know when conditions are just right." Then, he added, as though in afterthought: "And I'll arrange so that you won't run up on Wilfred Horton."

"What's the matter with Wilfred Horton?" demanded Samson, a shade curtly.

"Nothing at all," replied Farbish, with entire gravity. "Personally, I like Horton immensely. I simply thought you might find things more congenial when he wasn't among those present."

Samson was puzzled, but he did not fancy hearing from this man's lips criticisms upon friends of his friends.

"Well, I reckon," he said, coolly, "I'd like him, too."

"I beg your pardon," said the other. "I supposed you knew, or I shouldn't have broached the topic."

"Knew what?"

"You must excuse me," demurred the visitor with dignity. "I shouldn't have mentioned the subject. I seem to have said too much."

"See here, Mr. Farbish," Samson spoke quietly, but imperatively; "if you know any reason why I shouldn't meet Mr. Wilfred Horton, I want you to tell me what it is. He is a friend of my friends. You say you've said too much. I reckon you've either said too much, or too little."

Then, very insidiously and artistically, seeming all the while reluctant and apologetic, the visitor proceeded to plant in Samson's mind an exaggerated and untrue picture of Horton's contempt for him and of Horton's resentment at the favor shown him by the Lescotts.

Samson heard him out with a face enigmatically set, and his voice was soft, as he said simply at the end:

"I'm obliged to you."

Farbish had hoped for more stress of feeling, but, as he walked home, he told himself that the sphinx-like features had been a mask, and that, when these two met, their coming together held potentially for a clash. He was judge enough of character to know that Samson's morbid pride would seal his lips as to the interview—until he met Horton.

In point of fact, Samson was at first only deeply wounded. That through her kindness to him Adrienne was having to fight his battles with a close friend he had never suspected. Then, slowly, a bitterness began to rankle, quite distinct from the hurt to his sensitiveness. His birthright of suspicion and tendency to foster hatreds had gradually been falling asleep under the disarming kindness of these persons. Now, they began to stir in him again vaguely, but forcibly, and to trouble him.

Samson did not appear at the Lescott house for two weeks after that. He had begun to think that, if his going there gave embarrassment to the girl who had been kind to him, it were better to remain away.

"I don't belong here," he told himself, bitterly. "I reckon everybody that knows me in New York, except the Lescotts, is laughing at me behind my back."

He worked fiercely, and threw into his work such fire and energy that it came out again converted into a boldness of stroke and an almost savage vigor of drawing. The instructor nodded his head over the easel, and passed on to the next student without having left the defacing mark of his relentless crayon. To the next pupil, he said:

"Watch the way that man South draws. He's not clever. He's elementally sincere, and, if he goes on, the first thing you know he will be a portrait painter. He won't merely draw eyes and lips and noses, but character and virtues and vices showing out through them."

And Samson met every gaze with smoldering savagery, searching for some one who might be laughing at him openly, or even covertly; instead of behind his back. The long-suffering fighting lust in him craved opportunity to break out and relieve the pressure on his soul. But no one laughed.

One afternoon late in November, a hint of blizzards swept snarling down the Atlantic seaboard from the polar floes, with wet flurries of snow and rain. Off on the marshes where the Kenmore Club had its lodge, the live decoys stretched their clipped wings, and raised their green necks restively into the salt wind, and listened. With dawn, they had heard, faint and far away, the first notes of that wild chorus with which the skies would ring until the southerly migrations ended—the horizon-distant honking of high-flying water fowl.

Then it was that Farbish dropped in with marching orders, and Samson, yearning to be away where there were open skies, packed George Lescott's borrowed paraphernalia, and prepared to leave that same night.

While he was packing, the telephone rang, and Samson heard Adrienne's voice at the other end of the wire.

"Where have you been hiding?" she demanded. "I'll have to send a truant officer after you."

"I've been very busy," said the man, "and I reckon, after all, you can't civilize a wolf. I'm afraid I've been wasting your time."

Possibly, the miserable tone of the voice told the girl more than the words.

"You are having a season with the blue devils," she announced. "You've been cooped up too much. This wind ought to bring the ducks, and——"

"I'm leaving to-night," Samson told her.

"It would have been very nice of you to have run up to say good-bye," she reproved. "But I'll forgive you, if you call me up by long distance. You will get there early in the morning. To-morrow, I'm going to Philadelphia over night. The next night, I shall be at the theater. Call me up after the theater, and tell me how you like it."

It was the same old frankness and friendliness of voice, and the same old note like the music of a reed instrument. Samson felt so comforted and reassured that he laughed through the telephone.

"I've been keeping away from you," he volunteered, "because I've had a relapse into savagery, and haven't been fit to talk to you. When I get back, I'm coming up to explain. And, in the meantime, I'll telephone."

On the train Samson was surprised to discover that, after all, he had Mr. William Farbish for a traveling companion. That gentleman explained that he had found an opportunity to play truant from business for a day or two, and wished to see Samson comfortably ensconced and introduced.

The first day Farbish and Samson had the place to themselves, but the next morning would bring others. Samson's ideas of a millionaires' shooting-box had been vague, but he had looked forward to getting into the wilds. The marshes were certainly desolate enough, and the pine woods through which the buckboard brought them. But, inside the club itself, the Kentuckian found himself in such luxurious comfort as he could not, in his own mind, reconcile with the idea of "going hunting." He would be glad when the cushioned chairs of the raftered lounging-room and the tinkle of high-ball ice and gossip were exchanged for the salt air and the blinds.

CHAPTER XXI

BUT, when he went out for his initiation, in the raw blackness before daybreak, and lay in the blind, with only his guide for a companion, he felt far away from artificial luxuries. The first pale streamers of dawn soon streaked the east, and the wind charged cuttingly like drawn sabers of galloping cavalry. The wooden decoys had been anchored with the live ducks swimming among them, and the world began to awake. He drew a long breath of contentment, and waited. Then came the trailing of gray and blue and green mists, and, following the finger of the silent boatman, he made out in the northern sky a slender wedge of black dots, against the spreading rosiness of the horizon. Soon after, he heard the clear clangor of throats high in the sky, answered by the nearer honking of the live decoys, and he felt a throbbing of his pulses as he huddled low against the damp bottom of the blind and waited.

The lines and wedges grew until the sky was stippled with them, and their strong-throated cries were a strident music. For a time, they passed in seeming thousands, growing from scarcely visible dots into speeding shapes with slender outstretched necks and bills, pointed like reversed compass needles to the south. As yet, they were all flying high, ignoring with lordly indifference the clamor of their renegade brothers, who shrieked to them through the morning mists to drop down, and feed on death.

But, as the day grew older, Samson heard the popping of guns off to the side, where other gunners lay in other blinds, and presently a drake veered from his line of flight, far off to the right, harkened to the voice of temptation, and led his flock circling toward the blind. Then, with a whir and drumming of dark-tipped wings, they came down, and struck the water, and the boy from Misery rose up, shooting as he came. He heard the popping of his guide's gun at his side, and saw the dead and crippled birds falling about him, amid the noisy clamor of their started flight.

That day, while the mountaineer was out on the flats, the party of men at the club had been swelled to a total of six, for in pursuance of the carefully arranged plans of Mr. Farbish, Mr. Bradburn had succeeded in inducing Wilfred Horton to run down for a day or two of the sport he loved. To outward seeming, the trip which the two men had made together had been quite casual, and the outgrowth of coincidence; yet, in point of fact, not only the drive from Baltimore in Horton's car, but the conversation by the way had been in pursuance of a plan, and the result was that, when Horton arrived that afternoon, he found his usually even temper ruffled by bits of maliciously broached gossip, until his resentment against Samson South had been fanned into danger heat. He did not know that South also was at the club, and he did not that afternoon go out to the blinds, but so far departed from his usual custom as to permit himself to sit for hours in the club grill.

And yet, as is often the case in carefully designed affairs, the one element that made most powerfully for the success of Farbish's scheme was pure accident. The carefully arranged meeting between the two men, the adroitly incited passions of each, would still have brought no clash, had not Wilfred Horton been affected by the flushing effect of alcohol. Since his college days, he had been invariably abstemious. To-night marked an exception.

He was rather surprised at the cordiality of the welcome accorded him, for, as chance would have it, except for Samson South, whom he had not yet seen, all the other sportsmen were men closely allied to the political and financial elements upon which he had been making war. Still, since they seemed willing to forget for the time that there had been a breach, he was equally so. Just now, he was feeling such bitterness for the Kentuckian that the foes of a less-personal sort seemed unimportant.

In point of fact, Wilfred Horton had spent a very bad day. The final straw had broken the back of his usually unruffled temper, when he had found in his room on reaching the Kenmore a copy of a certain New York weekly paper, and had read a page, which chanced to be lying face up (a chance carefully prearranged). It was an item of which Farbish had known, in advance of publication, but Wilfred would never have seen that sheet, had it not been so carefully brought to his attention. There were hints of the strange infatuation which a certain young woman seemed to entertain for a partially civilized stranger who had made his entrée to New York *via* the Police Court, and who wore his hair long in imitation of a Biblical character of the same name. The supper at the Wigwam Inn was mentioned, and the character of the place intimated. Horton felt this objectionable innuendo was directly traceable to Adrienne's ill-judged friendship for the mountaineer, and he bitterly blamed the mountaineer. And, while he had been brooding on these matters, a man acting as Farbish's ambassador had dropped into his room, since Farbish himself knew that Horton would not listen to his confidences. The delegated spokesman warned Wilfred that Samson South had spoken pointedly of him, and advised cautious conduct, in a fashion calculated to inflame.

Samson, it was falsely alleged, had accused him of saying derogatory things in his absence, which he would hardly venture to repeat in his presence. In short, it was put up to Horton to announce his opinion openly, or eat the crow of cowardice.

That evening, when Samson went to his room, Farbish joined him.

"I've been greatly annoyed to find," he said, seating himself on Samson's bed, "that Horton arrived to-day."

"I reckon that's all right," said Samson. "He's a member, isn't he?"

Farbish appeared dubious.

"I don't want to appear in the guise of a prophet of trouble," he said, "but you are my guest here, and I must warn you. Horton thinks of you as a 'gun-fighter' and a dangerous man. He won't take chances with you. If there is a clash, it will be serious. He doesn't often drink, but to-day he's doing it, and may be ugly. Avoid an altercation if you can, but if it comes—" He broke off and added seriously: "You will have to get him, or he will get you. Are you armed?"

The Kentuckian laughed.

"I reckon I don't need to be armed amongst gentlemen."

Farbish drew from his pocket a magazine pistol.

"It won't hurt you to slip that into your clothes," he insisted.

For an instant, the mountaineer stood looking at his host and with eyes that bored deep, but whatever was in his mind as he made that scrutiny he kept to himself. At last, he took the magazine pistol, turned it over in his hand, and put it into his pocket.

"Mr. Farbish," he said, "I've been in places before now where men were drinking who had made threats against me. I think you are excited about this thing. If anything starts, he will start it."

At the dinner table, Samson South and Wilfred Horton were introduced, and acknowledged their introductions with the briefest and most formal of nods. During the course of the meal, though seated side by side, each ignored the presence of the other. Samson was, perhaps, no more silent than usual. Always, he was the listener except when a question was put to him direct, but the silence which sat upon Wilfred Horton was a departure from his ordinary custom.

He had discovered in his college days that liquor, instead of exhilarating him, was an influence under which he grew morose and sullen, and that discovery had made him almost a total abstainer. To-night, his glass was constantly filled and emptied, and, as he ate, he gazed ahead, and thought resentfully of the man at his side.

When the coffee had been brought, and the cigars lighted, and the servants had withdrawn, Horton, with the manner of one who had been awaiting an opportunity, turned slightly in his chair, and gazed insolently at the Kentuckian.

Samson South still seemed entirely unconscious of the other's existence, though in reality no detail of the brewing storm had escaped him. He was studying the other faces around the table, and what he saw in them appeared to occupy him. Wilfred Horton's cheeks were burning with a dull flush, and his eyes were narrowing with an unveiled dislike. Suddenly, a silence fell on the party, and, as the men sat puffing their cigars, Horton turned toward the Kentuckian. For a moment, he glared in silence, then with an impetuous exclamation of disgust he announced:

"See here, South, I want you to know that if I'd understood you were to be here, I wouldn't have come. It has pleased me to express my opinion of you to a number of people, and now I mean to express it to you in person."

Samson looked around, and his features indicated neither surprise nor interest. He caught Farbish's eye at the same instant, and, though the plotter said nothing, the glance was subtle and expressive. It seemed to prompt and goad him on, as though the man had said:

"You mustn't stand that. Go after him."

"I reckon"—Samson's voice was a pleasant drawl—"it doesn't make any particular difference, Mr. Horton."

"Even if what I said didn't happen to be particularly commendatory?" inquired Horton, his eyes narrowing.

"So long," replied the Kentuckian, "as what you said was your own opinion, I don't reckon it would interest me much."

"In point of fact"—Horton was gazing with steady hostility into Samson's eyes—"I prefer to tell you. I have rather generally expressed the belief that you are a damned savage, unfit for decent society."

Samson's face grew rigid and a trifle pale. His mouth set itself in a straight line, but, as Wilfred Horton came to his feet with the last words, the mountaineer remained seated.

"And," went on the New Yorker, flushing with suddenly augmenting passion, "what I said I still believe to be true, and repeat in your presence. At another time and place, I shall be even more explicit. I shall ask you to explain—certain things."

"Mr. Horton," suggested Samson in an ominously quiet voice, "I reckon you're a little drunk. If I were you, I'd sit down."

Wilfred's face went from red to white, and his shoulders stiffened. He leaned forward, and for the instant no one moved. The tick of a hall clock was plainly audible.

"South," he said, his breath coming in labored excitement, "defend yourself!"

Samson still sat motionless.

"Against what?" he inquired.

"Against that!" Horton struck the mountain man across the face with his open hand. Instantly, there was a commotion of scraping chairs and shuffling feet, mingled with a chorus of inarticulate protest. Samson had risen, and, for a second, his face had become a thing of unspeakable passion. His hand instinctively swept toward his pocket—and stopped half-way. He stood by his overturned chair, gazing into the eyes of his assailant, with an effort at self-mastery which gave his chest and arms the appearance of a man writhing and stiffening under electrocution. Then, he forced both hands to his back and gripped them there. For a moment, the tableau was held, then the man from the mountains began speaking, slowly and in a tone of dead-level monotony. Each syllable was portentously distinct and clear clipped.

"Maybe you know why I don't kill you. . . . Maybe you don't. . . . I don't give a damn whether you do or not. . . . That's the first blow I've ever passed. . . . I ain't going to hit back. . . . You need a friend pretty bad just now. . . . For certain reasons, I'm going to be that friend. . . . Don't you see that this thing is a damned frame-up? . . . Don't you see that I was brought here to murder you?" He turned suddenly to Farbish.

"Why did you insist on my putting that in my pocket"—Samson took out the pistol, and threw it down on the table-cloth in front of Wilfred, where it struck and shivered a half-filled wine-glass—"and why did you warn me that this man meant to kill me, unless I killed him first? I was meant to be your catspaw to put Wilfred Horton out of your way. I may be a barbarian and a savage, but I can smell a rat—if it's dead enough!"

For an instant, there was absolute and hushed calm. Wilfred Horton picked up the discarded weapon and looked at it in bewildered stupefaction, then slowly his face flamed with distressing mortification.

"Any time you want to fight me"—Samson had turned again to face him, and was still talking in his deadly quiet voice—"except to-night, you can find me. I've never been hit before without hitting back. That blow has got to be paid for—but the man that's really responsible has got to pay first. When I fight you, I'll fight for myself, not for a bunch of damned murderers. . . . Just now, I've got other business. That man framed this up!" He pointed a lean finger across the table into the startled countenance of Mr. Farbish. "He knew! He has been working on this job for a month. I'm going to attend to his case now."

As Samson started toward Farbish, the conspirator rose, and, with an excellent counterfeit of insulted virtue, pushed back his chair.

"By God," he indignantly exclaimed, "you mustn't try to embroil me in your quarrels. You must apologize. You are talking wildly, South."

"Am I?" questioned the Kentuckian, quietly; "I'm going to act wildly in a minute."

He halted a short distance from Farbish, and drew from his pocket a crumpled scrap of the offending magazine page: the item that had offended Horton.

"I may not have good manners, Mister Farbish, but where I come from we know how to handle varmints." He dropped his voice and added for the plotter's ear only: "Here's a little matter on the side that concerns only us. It wouldn't interest these other gentlemen." He opened his hand, and added: "Here, *eat* that!"

Farbish, with a frightened glance at the set face of the man who was advancing upon him, leaped back, and drew from his pocket a pistol—it was an exact counterpart of the one with which he had supplied Samson.

With a panther-like swiftness, the Kentuckian leaped forward, and struck up the weapon, which spat one ineffective bullet into the rafters. There was a momentary scuffle of swaying bodies and a crash under which the table groaned amid the shattering of glass and china. Then, slowly, the conspirator's body bent back at the waist, until its shoulders were stretched on the disarranged cloth, and the white face, with purple veins swelling on the forehead, stared up between two brown hands that gripped its throat.

"Swallow that!" ordered the mountaineer.

For just an instant, the company stood dumfounded, then a strained, unnatural voice broke the silence.

"Stop him, he's going to kill the man!"

The odds were four to two, and with a sudden rally to the support of their chief plotter, the other conspirators rushed the figure that stood throttling his victim. But Samson South was in his element. The dammed-up wrath that had been smoldering during these last days was having a tempestuous outlet. He had found men who, in a gentlemen's club to which he had come as a guest, sought to use him as a catspaw and murderer.

They had planned to utilize the characteristics upon which they relied in himself. They had thought that, if once angered, he would relapse into the feudist, and forget that his surroundings were those of gentility and civilization. Very well, he would oblige them, but not as a blind dupe. He would be as elementally primitive as they had pictured him, but the victims of his savagery should be of his own choosing. Before his eyes swam a red mist of wrath. Once before, as a boy, he had seen things as through a fog of blood. It was the day when the factions met at Hixon, and he had carried the gun of his father for the first time into action. The only way his eyes could be cleared of that fiery haze was that they should first see men falling.

As they assaulted him, *en masse*, he seized a chair, and swung it flail-like about his head. For a few moments, there was a crashing of glass and china, and a clatter of furniture and a chaos of struggle. At its center, he stood wielding his impromptu weapon, and, when two of his assailants had fallen under its sweeping blows, and Farbish stood weakly supporting himself against the table and gasping for the breath which had been choked out of him, the mountaineer hurled aside his chair, and plunged for the sole remaining man. They closed in a clinch. The last antagonist was a boxer, and when he saw the Kentuckian advance toward him empty-handed, he smiled and accepted the gauge of battle. In weight and reach and practice, he knew that he had the advantage, and, now that it was man to man, he realized that there was no danger of interference from Horton. But Samson knew nothing of boxing. He had learned his fighting tactics in the rough-and-tumble school of the mountains; the school of "fist and skull," of fighting with hands and head and teeth, and as the Easterner squared off he found himself caught in a flying tackle and went to the floor locked in an embrace that carried down with it chairs and furniture. As he struggled and rolled, pitting his gymnasium training against the unaccustomed assault of cyclonic fury, he felt the strong fingers of two hands close about his throat and lost consciousness.

Samson South rose, and stood for a moment panting in a scene of wreckage and disorder. The table was littered with shivered glasses and decanters and chinaware. The furniture was scattered and overturned. Farbish was weakly leaning to one side in the seat to which he had made his way. The men who had gone down under the heavy blows of the chair lay quietly where they had fallen.

Wilfred Horton stood waiting. The whole affair had transpired with such celerity and speed that he had hardly understood it, and had taken no part. But, as he met the gaze of the disordered figure across the wreckage of a dinner-table, he realized that now, with the preliminaries settled, he who had struck Samson in the face must give satisfaction for the blow. Horton was sober, as cold sober as though he had jumped into ice-water, and though he was not in the least afraid, he was mortified, and, had apology at such a time been possible, would have made it. He knew that he had misjudged his man; he saw the outlines of the plot as plainly as Samson had seen them, though more tardily.

Samson's toe touched the pistol which had dropped from Farbish's hand and he contemptuously kicked it to one side. He came back to his place.

"Now, Mr. Horton," he said to the man who stood looking about with a dazed expression, "if you're still of the same mind, I can accommodate you. You lied when you said I was a savage—though just now it sort of looks like I was, and"—he paused, then added—"and I'm ready either to fight or shake hands. Either way suits me."

For the moment, Horton did not speak, and Samson slowly went on:

"But, whether we fight or not, you've got to shake hands with me when we're finished. You and me ain't going to start a feud. This is the first time I've ever refused to let a man be my enemy if he wanted to. I've got my own reasons. I'm going to make you shake hands with me whether you like it or not, but if you want to fight first it's satisfactory. You said awhile ago you would be glad to be more explicit with me when we were alone—" He paused and looked about the room. "Shall I throw these damned murderers out of here, or will you go into another room and talk?"

"Leave them where they are," said Horton, quietly. "We'll go into the reading-room. Have you killed any of them?" '

"I don't know," said the other, curtly, "and I don't care."

When they were alone, Samson went on:

"I know what you want to ask me about, and I don't mean to answer you. You want to question me about Miss Lescott. Whatever she and I have done doesn't concern you. I will say this much: if I've been ignorant of New York ways, and my ignorance has embarrassed her, I'm sorry.

"I suppose you know that she's too damned good for you—just like she's too good for me. But she thinks more of you than she does of me—and she's yours. As for me, I have nothing to apologize to you for. Maybe, I have something to ask her pardon about, but she hasn't asked it.

"George Lescott brought me up here, and befriended me. Until a year ago, I had never known any life except that of the Cumberland Mountains. Until I met Miss Lescott, I had never known a woman of your world. She was good to me. She saw that in spite of my roughness and ignorance I wanted to learn, and she taught me. You chose to misunderstand, and dislike me. These men saw that, and believed that, if they could make you insult me, they could make me kill you. As to your part, they succeeded. I didn't see fit to oblige them, but, now that I've settled with them, I'm willing to give you satisfaction. Do we fight now, and shake hands afterward, or do we shake hands without fighting?"

Horton stood silently studying the mountaineer.

"Good God!" he exclaimed at last. "And you are the man I undertook to criticize!"

"You ain't answered my question," suggested Samson South.

"South, if you are willing to shake hands with me, I shall be grateful. I may as well admit that, if you had thrashed me before that crowd, you could hardly have succeeded in making me feel smaller. I have played into their hands. I have been a damned fool. I have riddled my own self-respect—and, if you can afford to accept my apologies and my hand, I am offering you both."

"I'm right glad to hear that," said the mountain boy, gravely. "I told you I'd just as lief shake hands as fight. . . . But just now I've got to go to the telephone."

The booth was in the same room, and, as Horton waited, he recognized the number for which Samson was calling. Wilfred's face once more flushed with the old prejudice. Could it be that Samson meant to tell Adrienne Lescott what had transpired? Was he, after all, the braggart who boasted of his fights? And, if not, was it Samson's custom to call her up every evening for a good-night message? He turned and went into the hall, but, after a few minutes, returned.

"I'm glad you liked the show. . . ." the mountaineer was saying. "No, nothing special is happening here—except that the ducks are plentiful. . . . Yes, I like it fine. . . . Mr. Horton's here. Wait a minute—I guess maybe he'd like to talk to you."

The Kentuckian beckoned to Horton, and, as he surrendered the receiver, left the room. He was thinking with a smile of the unconscious humor with which the girl's voice had just come across the wire:

"I knew that, if you two met each other, you would become friends."

"I reckon," said Samson, ruefully, when Horton joined him, "we'd better look around, and see how bad those fellows are hurt in there. They may need a doctor." And the two went back to find several startled servants assisting to their beds the disabled combatants, and the next morning their inquiries elicited the information that the gentlemen were all "able to be about, but were breakfasting in their rooms."

Such as looked from their windows that morning saw an unexpected climax, when the car of Mr. Wilfred

Horton drove away from the club carrying the man whom they had hoped to see killed, and the man they had hoped to see kill him. The two appeared to be in excellent spirits and thoroughly congenial, as the car rolled out of sight, and the gentlemen who were left behind decided that, in view of the circumstances, the "extraordinary spree" of last night had best go unadvertised into ancient history.

CHAPTER XXII

THE second year of a new order brings fewer radical changes than the first. Samson's work began to forge out of the ranks of the ordinary, and to show symptoms of a quality which would some day give it distinction. Heretofore, his instructors had held him rigidly to the limitations of black and white, but now they took off the bonds, and permitted him the colorful delight of attempting to express himself from the palette. It was like permitting a natural poet to leave prose, and play with prosody.

Sometimes, when his thoughts went back to the life he had left, it seemed immensely far away, as though it were really the life of another incarnation, and old ideas that had seemed axiomatic to his boyhood stood before him in the guise of strangers: strangers tattered and vagabond. He wondered if, after all, the new gods were sapping his loyalty. At such times, he would for days keep morosely to himself, picturing the death-bed of his father, and seeming to hear a small boy's voice making a promise. Sometimes, that promise seemed monstrous, in the light of his later experience. But it was a promise—and no man can rise in his own esteem by treading on his vows. In these somber moods, there would appear at the edges of his drawing-paper terrible, vividly graphic little heads, not drawn from any present model. They were sketched in a few ferociously powerful strokes, and always showed the same malevolent visage—a face black with murder and hate-endowed, the countenance of Jim Asberry. Sometimes would come a wild, heart-tearing longing for the old places. He wanted to hear the frogs boom, and to see the moon spill a shower of silver over the ragged shoulder of the mountain. He wanted to cross a certain stile, and set out for a certain cabin where a certain girl would be. He told himself that he was still loyal, that above all else he loved his people. When he saw these women, whose youth and beauty lasted long into life, whose manners and clothes spoke of ease and wealth and refinement, he saw Sally again as he had left her, hugging his "rifle-gun" to her breast, and he felt that the only thing he wanted utterly was to take her in his arms. Yes, he would return to Sally, and to his people—some day. The some day he did not fix. He told himself that the hills were only thirty hours away, and therefore he could go any time—which is the other name for no time. He had promised Lescott to remain here for eighteen months, and, when that interval ended, he seemed just on the verge of grasping his work properly. He assured himself often and solemnly that his creed was unchanged; his loyalty untainted; and the fact that it was necessary to tell himself proved that he was being weaned from his traditions. And so, though he often longed for home, he did not return. And then reason would rise up and confound him. Could he paint pictures in the mountains? If he did, what would he do with them? If he went back to that hermit life, would he not vindicate his uncle's prophecy that he had merely unplaced himself? And, if he went back and discharged his promise, and then returned again to the new fascination, could he bring Sally with him into this life—Sally, whom he had scornfully told that a "gal didn't need no l'arnin'?" And the answer to all these questions was only that there was no answer.

One day, Adrienne looked up from a sheaf of his very creditable landscape studies to inquire suddenly:

"Samson, are you a rich man, or a poor one?"

He laughed. "So rich," he told her, "that unless I can turn some of this stuff into money within a year or two, I shall have to go back to hoeing corn."

She nodded gravely.

"Hasn't it occurred to you," she demanded, "that in a way you are wasting your gifts? They were talking about you the other evening—several painters. They all said that you should be doing portraits."

The Kentuckian smiled. His masters had been telling him the same thing. He had fallen in love with art through the appeal of the skies and hills. He had followed its call at the proselyting of George Lescott, who painted only landscape. Portraiture seemed a less-artistic form of expression. He said so.

"That may all be very true," she conceded, "but you can go on with your landscapes, and let your portraits pay the way. With your entrée, you could soon have a very enviable *clientèle.*"

" 'So she showed me the way, to promotion and pay,
And I learned about women from her,' "

quoted Samson with a laugh.

"And," she added, "since I am very vain and moderately rich, I hereby commission you to paint me, just as soon as you learn how."

Farbish had simply dropped out. Bit by bit, the truth of the conspiracy had leaked, and he knew that his usefulness was ended, and that well-lined pocketbooks would no longer open to his profligate demands. The bravo and plotter whose measure has been taken is a broken reed. Farbish made no farewells. He had come from nowhere and his going was like his coming.

* * * * * *

Sally had started to school. She had not announced that she meant to do so, but each day the people of Misery saw her old sorrel mare making its way to and from the general direction of Stagbone College, and they smiled. No one knew how Sally's cheeks flamed as she sat alone on Saturdays and Sundays on the rock at the backbone's rift. She was taking her place, morbidly sensitive and a woman of eighteen, among little spindle-shanked girls in short skirts, and the little girls were more advanced than she. But she, too, meant to have "l'arnin' "—as much of it as was necessary to satisfy the lover who might never come. It must be admitted that learning for its own sake did not make a clarion-tongued appeal to the girl's soul. Had Samson been satisfied with her untutored, she would have been content to remain untutored. He had said that these things were of no importance in her, but that was before he had gone forth into the world. If, she naïvely told herself, he should come back of that same opinion, she would never "let on" that she had learned things. She would toss overboard her acquirements as ruthlessly as useless ballast from an over-encumbered boat. But, if Samson came demanding these attainments, he must find her possessed of them. So far, her idea of "l'arnin'" embraced the three R's only. And, yet, the "fotched-on" teachers at the "college" thought her the most voraciously ambitious pupil they had ever had, so unflaggingly did she toil, and the most remarkably acquisitive, so fast did she learn. But her studies had again been interrupted, and Miss Grover, her teacher, riding over one day to find out why her prize scholar had deserted, met in the road an empty "jolt-wagon," followed by a ragged cortège of mounted men and women, whose faces were still lugubrious with the effort of recent mourning. Her questions elicited the information that they were returning from the "buryin'" of the Widow Miller.

Sally was not in the procession, and the teacher, riding on, found her lying face down among the briars of the desolate meeting-house yard, her small body convulsively heaving with her weeping, and her slim fingers grasping the thorny briar shoots as though she would still hold to the earth that lay in freshly broken clods over her mother's grave.

Miss Grover lifted her gently, and at first the girl only stared at her out of wide, unseeing eyes.

"You've nothing to keep you here now," said the older woman, gently. "You can come to us, and live at the college." She had learned from Sally's lips that she lived alone with her mother and younger brother. "You can't go on living there now."

But the girl drew away, and shook her head with a wild torrent of childish dissent.

"No, I kain't, neither!" she declared, violently. "I kain't!"

"Why, dear?" The teacher took the palpitating little figure in her arms and kissed the wet face. She had learned something of this sweet wood-thrush girl, and had seen both sides of life's coin enough to be able to close her eyes and ears, and visualize the woman that this might be.

" 'Cause I kain't!" was the obstinate reply.

Being wise, Miss Grover desisted from urging, and went with Sally to the desolated cabin, which she straightway began to overhaul and put to rights. The widow had been dying for a week. It was when she lifted Samson's gun with the purpose of sweeping the corner that the girl swooped down on her, and rescued the weapon from her grasp.

"Nobody but me mustn't tech thet rifle-gun," she exclaimed, and then, little by little, it came out that the reason Sally could not leave this cabin, was because some time there might be a whippoorwill call out by the stile, and, when it came, she must be there to answer. And, when at the next vacation Miss Grover rode over, and announced that she meant to visit Sally for a month or two, and when under her deft hands the cabin began to transform itself, and the girl to transform herself, she discovered that Sally found in the graveyard another magnet. There, she seemed to share something with Samson where their dead lay buried. While the "fotched-on" lady taught the girl, the girl taught the "fotched-on" lady, for the birds were her brothers, and the flowers her cousins, and in the poetry that existed before forms of meter came into being she was deeply versed.

Toward the end of that year, Samson undertook his portrait of Adrienne Lescott. The work was nearing completion, but it had been agreed that the girl herself was not to have a peep at the canvas until the painter was ready to unveil it in a finished condition. Often as she posed, Wilfred Horton idled in the studio with them, and often George Lescott came to criticize, and left without criticizing. The girl was impatient for the day when she, too, was to see the picture, concerning which the three men maintained so profound a secrecy. She knew that Samson was a painter who analyzed with his brush, and that his picture would show her not only features and expression, but the man's estimate of herself.

"Do you know," he said one day, coming out from behind his easel and studying her, through half-closed eyes, "I never really began to know you until now? Analyzing you—studying you in this fashion, not by your words, but by your expression, your pose, the very unconscious essence of your personality—these things are illuminating."

"Can I smile," she queried obediently, "or do I have to keep my face straight?"

"You may smile for two minutes," he generously conceded, "and I'm going to come over and sit on the floor at your feet, and watch you do it."

"And under the X-ray scrutiny of this profound analysis," she laughed, "do you like me?"

"Wait and see," was his non-committal rejoinder.

For a few moments, neither of them spoke. He sat there gazing up, and she gazing down. Though neither of them said it, both were thinking of the changes that had taken place since, in this same room, they had first met. The man knew that many of the changes in himself were due to her, and she began to wonder vaguely if he had not also been responsible for certain differences in her.

He felt for her, besides a deep friendship—such a deep friendship that it might perhaps be even more—a measureless gratitude. She had been loyal, and had turned and shaped with her deft hand and brain the rough clay of his crude personality into something that was beginning to show finish and design. Perhaps, she liked him the better because of certain obstinate qualities which, even to her persuasive influence, remained unaltered. But, if she liked him the better for these things, she yet felt that her dominion over him was not complete.

Now, as they sat there alone in the studio, a shaft of sunlight from the skylight fell on his squarely blocked chin, and he tossed his head, throwing back the long lock from his forehead. It was as though he was emphasizing with that characteristic gesture one of the things in which he had not yielded to her modeling. The long hair still fell low around his head. Just now, he was roughly dressed and paint-stained, but usually he presented the inconspicuous appearance of the well-groomed man—except for that long hair. It was not so much as a matter of personal appearance but as a reminder of the old roughness that she resented this. She had often suggested a visit to the barber, but to no avail.

"Although I am not painting you," she said with a smile, "I have been studying you, too. As you stand there before your canvas, your own personality is revealed—and I have not been entirely unobservant myself."

"'And under the X-ray scrutiny of this profound analysis,'" he quoted with a laugh, "do you like me?"

"Wait and see," she retorted.

"At all events"—he spoke gravely—"you must try to like me a little, because I am not what I was. The person that I am is largely the creature of your own fashioning. Of course, you had very raw material to work with, and you can't make a silk purse of"—he broke off and smiled—"well, of me, but in time you may at least get me mercerized a little."

For no visible reason, she flushed, and her next question came a trifle eagerly:

"Do you mean that I have influenced you?"

"Influenced me, Drennie?" he repeated. "You have done more than that. You have painted me out, and painted me over."

She shook her head, and in her eyes danced a light of subtle coquetry.

"There are things I have tried to do, and failed," she told him.

His eyes showed surprise.

"Perhaps," he apologized, "I am dense, and you may have to tell me bluntly what I am to do. But you know that you have only to tell me."

For a moment, she said nothing, then she shook her head again.

"Issue your orders," he insisted. "I am waiting to obey."

She hesitated again, then said, slowly:

"Have your hair cut. It's the one uncivilized thing about you."

For an instant, Samson's face hardened.

"No," he said; "I don't care to do that."

"Oh, very well!" she laughed, lightly. "In that event, of course, you shouldn't do it." But her smile faded, and after a moment he explained:

"You see, it wouldn't do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I've got to keep something as it was to remind me of a prior claim on my life."

For an instant the girl's face clouded, and grew deeply troubled.

"You don't mean," she asked, with an outburst of interest more vehement than she had meant to show, or realized that she was showing—"you don't mean that you still adhere to ideas of the vendetta?" Then she broke off with a laugh, a rather nervous laugh. "Of course not," she answered herself. "That would be too absurd!"

"Would it?" asked Samson, simply. He glanced at his watch. "Two minutes up," he announced. "The model will please resume the pose. By the way, may I drive with you to-morrow afternoon?"

* * * * * *

The next afternoon, Samson ran up the street steps of the Lescott house, and rang the bell, and a few moments later Adrienne appeared. The car was waiting outside, and, as the girl came down the stairs in motor coat and veil, she paused and her fingers on the bannisters tightened in surprise as she looked at the man who stood below holding his hat in his hand, with his face upturned. The well-shaped head was no longer marred by the mane which it had formerly worn, but was close cropped, and under the transforming influence of the change the forehead seemed bolder and higher, and to her thinking the strength of the purposeful features was enhanced, and yet, had she known it, the man felt that he had for the first time surrendered a point which meant an abandonment of something akin to principle.

She said nothing, but as she took his hand in greeting, her fingers pressed his own in handclasp more lingering than usual.

Late that evening, when Samson returned to the studio, he found a missive in his letter-box, and, as he took it out, his eyes fell on the postmark. It was dated from Hixon, Kentucky, and, as the man slowly climbed the stairs, he turned the envelope over in his hand with a strange sense of misgiving and premonition.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE letter was written in the cramped hand of Brother Spencer. Through its faulty diction ran a plainly discernible undernote of disapproval for Samson, though there was no word of reproof or criticism. It was plain that it was sent as a matter of courtesy to one who, having proven an apostate, scarcely merited such consideration. It informed him that old Spicer South had been "mighty porely," but was now better, barring the breaking of age. Every one was "tolerable." Then came the announcement which the letter had been written to convey.

The term of the South-Hollman truce had ended, and it had been renewed for an indefinite period.

"Some of your folks thought they ought to let you know because they promised to give you a say," wrote the informant. "But they decided that it couldn't hardly make no difference to you, since you have left the mountains, and if you cared anything about it, you knew the time, and could of been here. Hoping this finds you well."

Samson's face clouded. He threw the soiled and scribbled missive down on the table and sat with unseeing eyes fixed on the studio wall. So, they had cast him out of their councils! They already thought of him as one who had been.

In that passionate rush of feeling, everything that had happened since he had left Misery seemed artificial and dream-like. He longed for the realities that were forfeited. He wanted to press himself close to the great, gray shoulders of rock that broke through the greenery like giants tearing off soft raiment. Those were his people back there. He should be running with the wolf-pack, not coursing with beagles.

He had been telling himself that he was loyal, and now he realized that he was drifting like the lotus-eaters. Things that had gripped his soul were becoming myths. Nothing in his life was honest—he had become as they had prophesied, a derelict. In that thorn-choked graveyard lay the crude man whose knotted hand had rested on his head just before death stiffened it, bestowing a mission.

"I hain't fergot ye, Pap." The words rang in his ears with the agony of a repudiated vow.

He rose and paced the floor, with teeth and hands clenched, and the sweat standing out on his forehead. His advisers had of late been urging him to go to Paris. He had refused, and his unconfessed reason had been that in Paris he could not answer a sudden call. He would go back to them now, and compel them to admit his leadership.

Then, his eyes fell on the unfinished portrait of Adrienne. The face gazed at him with its grave sweetness; its fragrant subtlety and its fine-grained delicacy. Her pictured lips were silently arguing for the life he had found among strangers, and her victory would have been an easy one, but for the fact that just now his conscience seemed to be on the other side. Samson's civilization was two years old—a thin veneer over a century of feudalism—and now the century was thundering its call of blood bondage. But, as the man struggled over the dilemma, the pendulum swung back. The hundred years had left, also, a heritage of quickness and bitterness to resent injury and injustice. His own people had cast him out. They had branded him as the deserter; they felt no need of him or his counsel. Very well, let them have it so. His problem had been settled for him. His Gordian knot was cut.

Sally and his uncle alone had his address. This letter, casting him out, must have been authorized by them, Brother Spencer acting merely as amanuensis. They, too, had repudiated him—and, if that were true, except for the graves of his parents the hills had no tie to hold him.

"Sally, Sally!" he groaned, dropping his face on his crossed arms, while his shoulders heaved in an agony of heart-break, and his words came in the old crude syllables: "I 'lowed you'd believe in me ef hell froze!" He rose after that, and made a fierce gesture with his clenched fists. "All right," he said, bitterly, "I'm shet of the lot of ye. I'm done!"

But it was easier to say the words of repudiation than to cut the ties that were knotted about his heart. Again, he saw Sally standing by the old stile in the starlight with sweet, loyal eyes lifted to his own, and again he heard her vow that, if he came back, she would be waiting. Now, that picture lay beyond a sea which he could not recross. Sally and his uncle had authorized his excommunication. There was, after all, in the entire world no faith which could stand unalterable, and in all the world no reward that could be a better thing than Dead-Sea fruit, without the love of that barefooted girl back there in the log cabin, whose sweet tongue could not fashion phrases except in illiteracy. He would have gambled his soul on her steadfastness without fear—and he bitterly told himself he would have lost. And yet—some voice sounded to him as he stood there alone in the studio with the arteries knotted on his temples and the blood running cold and bitter in his veins—and yet what right had he, the deserter, to demand faith? One hand went up and clasped his forehead—and the hand fell on the head that had been shorn because a foreign woman had asked it. What tradition had he kept inviolate? And, in his mood, that small matter of shortened hair meant as great and bitter surrender as it had meant to the Samson before him, whose mighty strength had gone out under the snipping of shears. What course was open to him now, except that of following the precedent of the other Samson, of pulling down the whole temple of his past? He was disowned, and could not return. He would go ahead with the other life, though at the moment he hated it.

With a rankling soul, the mountaineer left New York. He wrote Sally a brief note, telling her that he was going to cross the ocean, but his hurt pride forbade his pleading for her confidence, or adding, "I love you." He plunged into the art life of the "other side of the Seine," and worked voraciously. He was trying to learn much—and to forget much.

One sunny afternoon, when Samson had been in the *Quartier Latin* for eight or nine months, the *concièrge* of his lodgings handed him, as he passed through the *cour*, an envelope addressed in the hand of Adrienne Lescott. He thrust it into his pocket for a later reading and hurried on to the *atelier* where he was to have a criticism that day. When the day's work was over, he was leaning on the embankment wall at the *Quai de Grand St. Augustin*, gazing idly at the fruit and flower stands that patched the pavement with color and at the gray walls of the Louvre across the Seine. His hand went into his pocket, and came out with the note. As he read it, he felt a glow of pleasurable surprise, and, wheeling, he retraced his steps briskly to his lodgings, where he began to pack. Adrienne had written that she and her mother and Wilfred Horton were sailing for Naples, and commanded him, unless he were too busy, to meet their steamer. Within two hours, he was bound for Lucerne to cross the Italian frontier by the slate-blue waters of Lake Maggiore.

A few weeks later Samson and Adrienne were standing together by moonlight in the ruins of the Coliseum. The junketing about Italy had been charming, and now, in that circle of sepia softness and broken columns, he looked at her, and suddenly asked himself:

"Just what does she mean to you?"

If he had never asked himself that question before, he knew now that it must some day be answered. Friendship had been a good and seemingly a sufficient definition. Now, he was not so sure that it could remain so.

Then, his thoughts went back to a cabin in the hills and a girl in calico. He heard a voice like the voice of a song-bird saying through tears:

"I couldn't live without ye, Samson. . . . I jest couldn't do hit!"

For a moment, he was sick of his life. It seemed that there stood before him, in that place of historic wraiths and memories, a girl, her eyes sad, but loyal and without reproof. For an instant, he could see a scene of centuries ago. A barbarian and captive girl stood in the arena, looking up with ignorant, but unflinching, eyes; and a man sat in the marble tiers looking down. The benches were draped with embroidered rugs and gold and scarlet hangings; the air was heavy with incense—and blood. About him sat men and women of Rome's culture, freshly perfumed from the baths. The slender figure in the dust of the circus alone was a creature without artifice. And, as she looked up, she recognized the man in the box, the man who had once been a barbarian, too, and she turned her eyes to the iron gates of the cages whence came the roar of the beasts, and waited the ordeal. And the face was the face of Sally.

"You look," said Adrienne, studying his countenance in the pallor of the moonlight. "as though you were seeing ghosts."

"I am," said Samson. "Let's go."

Adrienne had not yet seen her portrait. Samson had needed a few hours of finishing when he left New York, though it was work which could be done away from the model. So, it was natural that, when the party reached Paris, Adrienne should soon insist on crossing the *Pont d' Alexandre III.* to his studio near the "*Boule Mich'*" for an inspection of her commissioned canvas. For a while, she wandered about the business-like place, littered with the gear of the painter's craft. It was, in a way, a form of mind-reading, for Samson's brush was the tongue of his soul.

The girl's eyes grew thoughtful, as she saw that he still drew the leering, saturnine face of Jim Asberry. He had not outgrown hate, then? But she said nothing, until he brought out and set on an easel her own portrait. For a moment, she gasped with sheer delight for the colorful mastery of the technique, and she would have been hard to please had she not been delighted with the conception of herself mirrored in the canvas. It was a face through which the soul showed, and the soul was strong and flawless. The girl's personality radiated from the canvas—and yet— A disappointed little look crossed and clouded her eyes. She was conscious of an indefinable catch of pain at her heart.

Samson stepped forward, and his waiting eyes, too, were disappointed.

"You don't like it, Drennie?" he anxiously questioned. But she smiled in answer, and declared:

"I love it."

He went out a few minutes later to telephone for her to Mrs. Lescott, and gave Adrienne *carte blanche* to browse among his portfolios and stacked canvases until his return. In a few minutes, she discovered one of those efforts which she called his "rebellious pictures."

These were such things as he painted, using no model except memory perhaps, not for the making of finished pictures, but merely to give outlet to his feelings; an outlet which some men might have found in talk.

This particular canvas was roughly blocked in, and it was elementally simple, but each brush stroke had been thrown against the surface with the concentrated fire and energy of a blow, except the strokes that had painted the face, and there the brush had seemed to kiss the canvas. The picture showed a barefooted girl, standing, in barbaric simplicity of dress, in the glare of the arena, while a gaunt lion crouched eying her. Her head was lifted as though she were listening to far-away music. In the eyes was indomitable courage. That canvas was at once a declaration of love, and a *miserere.* Adrienne set it up beside her own portrait, and, as she studied the two with her chin resting on her gloved hand, her eyes cleared of questioning. Now, she knew what she missed in her own more beautiful likeness. It had been painted with all the admiration of the mind. This other had been dashed off straight from the heart—and this other was Sally! She replaced the sketch where she had found it, and Samson, returning, found her busy with little sketches of the Seine.

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"Drennie," pleaded Wilfred Horton, as the two leaned on the deck rail of the *Mauretania,* returning from Europe, "are you going to hold me off indefinitely? I've served my seven years for Rachel, and thrown in some extra time. Am I no nearer the goal?"

The girl looked at the oily heave of the leaden and cheerless Atlantic, and its somber tones found reflection in her eyes. She shook her head.

"I wish I knew," she said, wearily. Then, she added, vehemently: "I'm not worth it, Wilfred. Let me go. Chuck me out of your life as a little pig who can't read her own heart; who is too utterly selfish to decide upon her own life."

"Is it"—he put the question with foreboding—"that, after all, I was a prophet? Have you—and South—wiped your feet on the doormat marked 'Platonic friendship'? Have you done that, Drennie?"

She looked up into his eyes. Her own were wide and honest and very full of pain.

"No," she said; "we haven't done that, yet. I guess we won't. . . . I think he'd rather stay outside, Wilfred. If I was sure I loved him, and that he loved me, I'd feel like a cheat—there is the other girl to think of. . . . And, besides, I'm not sure what I want myself. . . . But I'm horribly afraid I'm going to end by losing you both."

Horton stood silent. It was tea-time, and from below came the strains of the ship's orchestra. A few ulster-muffled passengers gloomily paced the deck.

"You won't lose us both, Drennie," he said, steadily. "You may lose your choice—but, if you find yourself able to fall back on substitutes, I'll still be there, waiting."

For once, he did not meet her scrutiny, or know of it. His own eyes were fixed on the slow swing of heavy, gray-green waters. He was smiling, but it is as a man smiles when he confronts despair, and pretends that everything is quite all right. The girl looked at him with a choke in her throat.

"Wilfred," she said, laying her hand on his arm, "I'm not worth worrying over. Really, I'm not. If Samson South proposed to me to-day, I know that I should refuse him. I am not at all sure that I am the least little bit in love with him. Only, don't you see I can't be quite sure I'm not? It would be horrible if we all made a mistake. May I have till Christmas to make up my mind for all time? I'll tell you then, dear, if you care to wait."

* * * * * *

Tamarack Spicer sat on the top of a box car, swinging his legs over the side. He was clad in overalls, and in the pockets of his breeches reposed a bulging flask of red liquor, and an unbulging pay envelope. Tamarack had been "railroading" for several months this time. He had made a new record for sustained effort and industry, but now June was beckoning him to the mountains with vagabond yearnings for freedom and leisure. Many things invited his soul. Almost four years had passed since Samson had left the mountains, and in four years a woman can change her mind. Sally might, when they met on the road, greet him once more as a kinsman, and agree to forget his faulty method of courtship. This time, he would be more diplomatic. Yesterday, he had gone to the boss, and "called for his time." To-day, he was paid off, and a free lance.

As he reflected on these matters, a fellow trainman came along the top of the car, and sat down at Tamarack's side. This brakeman had also been recruited from the mountains, though from another section—over toward the Virginia line.

"So yer quittin'?" observed the new-comer.

Spicer nodded.

"Goin' back thar on Misery?"

Again, Tamarack answered with a jerk of his head.

"I've been layin' off ter tell ye somethin', Tam'rack."

"Cut her loose."

"I laid over in Hixon last week, an' some fellers that used ter know my mother's folks took me down in the cellar of Hollman's store, an' give me some licker."

"What of hit?"

"They was talkin' 'bout you."

"What did they say?"

"I seen that they was enemies of yours, an' they wasn't in no good humor, so, when they axed me ef I knowed ye, I 'lowed I didn't know nothin' good about ye. I had ter cuss ye out, or git in trouble myself."

Tamarack cursed the whole Hollman tribe, and his companion went on:

"Jim Asberry was thar. He 'lowed they'd found out thet you'd done shot Purvy thet time, an' he said"—the brakeman paused to add emphasis to his conclusion—"thet the next time ye come home, he 'lowed ter git ye plumb shore."

Tamarack scowled.

"Much obleeged," he replied.

At Hixon, Tamarack Spicer strolled along the street toward the court-house. He wished to be seen. So long as it was broad daylight, and he displayed no hostility, he knew he was safe—and he had plans.

Standing before the Hollman store were Jim Asberry and several companions. They greeted Tamarack affably, and he paused to talk.

"Ridin' over ter Misery?" inquired Asberry.

" 'Lowed I mout as well."

"Mind ef I rides with ye es fur es Jesse's place?"

"Plumb glad ter have company," drawled Tamarack.

They chatted of many things, and traveled slowly, but, when they came to those narrows where they could not ride stirrup to stirrup, each jockeyed for the rear position, and the man who found himself forced into the lead turned in his saddle and talked back over his shoulder, with wary, though seemingly careless, eyes. Each knew the other was bent on his murder.

At Purvy's gate, Asberry waved farewell, and turned in. Tamarack rode on, but shortly he hitched his horse in the concealment of a hollow, walled with huge rocks, and disappeared into the laurel.

He began climbing, in a crouched position, bringing each foot down noiselessly, and pausing often to listen. Jim Asberry had not been outwardly armed when he left Spicer. But, soon, the brakeman's delicately attuned ears caught a sound that made him lie flat in the lee of a great log, where he was masked in clumps of flowering rhododendron. Presently, Asberry passed him, also walking cautiously, but hurriedly, and cradling a Winchester rifle in the hollow of his arm. Then, Tamarack knew that Asberry was taking this cut to head him off, and waylay him in the gorge a mile away by road but a short distance only over the hill. Spicer held his heavy revolver cocked in his hand, but it was too near the Purvy house to risk a shot. He waited a moment, and then, rising, went on noiselessly with a snarling grin, stalking the man who was stalking him.

Asberry found a place at the foot of a huge pine where the undergrowth would cloak him. Twenty yards below ran the creek-bed road, returning from its long horseshoe deviation. When he had taken his position, his faded butternut clothing matched the earth as inconspicuously as a quail matches dead leaves, and he settled himself to wait. Slowly and with infinite caution, his intended victim stole down, guarding each step, until he was in short and certain range, but, instead of being at the front, he came from the back. He, also, lay flat on his stomach, and raised the already cocked pistol. He steadied it in a two-handed grip against a tree trunk, and trained it with deliberate care on a point to the left of the other man's spine just below the shoulder blades.

Then, he pulled the trigger! He did not go down to inspect his work. It was not necessary. The instantaneous fashion with which the head of the ambuscader settled forward on its face told him all he wanted to know. He slipped back to his horse, mounted and rode fast to the house of Spicer South, demanding asylum.

The next day came word that, if Tamarack Spicer would surrender and stand trial, in a court dominated by the Hollmans, the truce would continue. Otherwise, the "war was on."

The Souths flung back this message:

"Come and git him."

But Hollman and Purvy, hypocritically clamoring for the sanctity of the law, made no effort to come and "git him." They knew that Spicer South's house was now a fortress, prepared for siege. They knew that every trail thither was picketed. Also, they knew a better way. This time, they had the color of the law on their side. The Circuit Judge, through the Sheriff, asked for troops, and troops came. Their tents dotted the river bank below the Hixon Bridge. A detail under a white flag went out after Tamarack Spicer. The militia Captain in command, who feared neither feudist nor death, was courteously received. He had brains, and he assured them that he acted under orders which could not be disobeyed. Unless they surrendered the prisoner, gatling guns would follow. If necessary they would be dragged behind ox-teams. Many militiamen might be killed, but for each of them the State had another. If Spicer would surrender, the officer would guarantee him personal protection, and, if it seemed necessary, a change of venue would secure him trial in another circuit. For hours, the clan deliberated. For the soldiers they felt no enmity. For the young Captain they felt an instinctive liking. He was a man.

Old Spicer South, restored to an echo of his former robustness by the call of action, gave the clan's verdict.

"Hit hain't the co'te we're skeered of. Ef this boy goes ter town, he won't never git inter no co'te. He'll be murdered."

The officer held out his hand.

"As man to man," he said, "I pledge you my word that no one shall take him except by process of law. I'm not working for the Hollmans, or the Purvys. I know their breed."

For a space, old South looked into the soldier's eyes, and the soldier looked back.

"I'll take yore handshake on thet bargain," said the mountaineer, gravely. "Tam'rack," he added, in a voice of finality, "ye've got ter go."

The officer had meant what he said. He marched his prisoner into Hixon at the center of a hollow square, with muskets at the ready. And yet, as the boy passed into the court-house yard, with a soldier rubbing elbows on each side, a cleanly aimed shot sounded from somewhere. The smokeless powder told no tale and with blue shirts and army hats circling him, Tamarack fell and died.

That afternoon, one of Hollman's henchmen was found lying in the road with his lifeless face in the water of the creek. The next day, as old Spicer South stood at the door of his cabin, a rifle barked from the hillside, and he fell, shot through the left shoulder by a bullet intended for his heart. All this while, the troops were helplessly camped at Hixon. They had power and inclination to go out and get men, but there was no man to get.

The Hollmans had used the soldiers as far as they wished; they had made them pull the chestnuts out of the fire and Tamarack Spicer out of his stronghold. They now refused to swear out additional warrants.

A detail had rushed into Hollman's store an instant after the shot which killed Tamarack was fired. Except for a woman buying a card of buttons, and a fair-haired clerk waiting on her, they found the building empty.

Back beyond, the hills were impenetrable, and answered no questions.

CHAPTER XXIV

OLD SPICER SOUTH would ten years ago have put a bandage on his wound and gone about his business, but now he tossed under his patchwork quilt, and Brother Spencer expressed grave doubts for his recovery. With his counsel unavailable Wile McCager, by common consent, assumed something like the powers of a regent and took upon himself the duties to which Samson should have succeeded.

That a Hollman should have been able to elude the pickets and penetrate the heart of South territory to Spicer South's cabin, was both astounding and alarming. The war was on without question now, and there must be council. Wile McCager had sent out a summons for the family heads to meet that afternoon at his mill. It was Saturday—"mill day"—and in accordance with ancient custom the lanes would be more traveled than usual.

Those men who came by the wagon road afforded no unusual spectacle, for behind each saddle sagged a sack of grain. Their faces bore no stamp of unwonted excitement, but every man balanced a rifle across his pommel. None the less, their purpose was grim, and their talk when they had gathered was to the point.

Old McCager, himself sorely perplexed, voiced the sentiment that the others had been too courteous to express. With Spicer South bed-ridden and Samson a renegade, they had no adequate leader. McCager was a solid man of intrepid courage and honesty, but grinding grist was his avocation, not strategy and tactics. The enemy had such masters of intrigue as Purvy and Judge Hollman.

Then, a lean sorrel mare came jogging into view, switching her fly-bitten tail, and on the mare's back, urging him with a long, leafy switch, sat a woman. Behind her sagged the two loaded ends of a corn-sack. She rode like the mountain women, facing much to the side, yet unlike them. Her arms did not flap. She did not bump gawkily up and down in her saddle. Her blue calico dress caught the sun at a distance, but her blue sunbonnet shaded and masked her face. She was lithe and slim, and her violet eyes were profoundly serious, and her lips were as resolutely set as Joan of Arc's might have been, for Sally Miller had come only ostensibly to have her corn ground to meal. She had really come to speak for the absent chief, and she knew that she would be met with derision. The years had sobered the girl, but her beauty had increased, though it was now of a chastened type, which gave her a strange and rather exalted refinement of expression.

Wile McCager came to the mill door, as she rode up, and lifted the sack from her horse.

"Howdy, Sally?" he greeted.

"Tol'able, thank ye," said Sally. "I'm goin' ter get off."

As she entered the great half-lighted room, where the mill stones creaked on their cumbersome shafts, the hum of discussion sank to silence. The place was brown with age and dirt, and powdered with a coarse dusting of meal. The girl nodded to the mountaineers gathered in conclave, then, turning to the miller she announced:

"I'm going to send for Samson."

The statement was at first met with dead silence, then came a rumble of indignant dissent, but for that the girl was prepared, as she was prepared for the contemptuous laughter which followed.

"I reckon if Samson was here," she said, dryly, "you all wouldn't think it was quite so funny."

Old Caleb Wiley spat through his bristling beard, and his voice was a quavering rumble.

"What we wants is a man. We hain't got no use fer no traitors thet's too almighty damn busy doin' fancy work ter stand by their kith an' kin."

"That's a lie!" said the girl, scornfully. "There's just one man living that's smart enough to match Jesse Purvy—an' that one man is Samson. Samson's got the right to lead the Souths, and he's going to do it—ef he wants to."

"Sally," Wile McCager spoke, soothingly, "don't go gittin' mad. Caleb talks hasty. We knows ye used ter be Samson's gal, an' we hain't aimin' ter hurt yore feelin's. But Samson's done left the mountings. I reckon ef he wanted ter come back, he'd a-come afore now. Let him stay whar he's at."

"Whar is he at?" demanded old Caleb Wiley, in a truculent voice.

"That's his business," Sally flashed back, "but I know. All I want to tell you is this. Don't you make a move till I have time to get word to him. I tell you, he's got to have his say."

"I reckon we hain't a-goin' ter wait," sneered Caleb, "fer a feller thet won't let hit be known whar he's a-sojournin' at. Ef ye air so shore of him, why won't ye tell us whar he is now?"

"That's my business, too." Sally's voice was resolute. "I've got a letter here—it'll take two days to get to Samson. It'll take him two or three days more to get here. You've got to wait a week."

"Sally," the temporary chieftain spoke still in a patient, humoring sort of voice, as to a tempestuous child, "thar hain't no place ter mail a letter nigher then Hixon. No South can't ride inter Hixon, an' ride out again. The mail-carrier won't be down this way fer two days yit."

"I'm not askin' any South to ride into Hixon. I recollect another time when Samson was the only one that would do that," she answered, still scornfully. "I didn't come here to ask favors. I came to give orders—for him. A train leaves soon in the morning. My letter's goin' on that train."

"Who's goin' ter take hit ter town fer ye?"

"I'm goin' to take it for myself." Her reply was given as a matter of course.

"That wouldn't hardly be safe, Sally," the miller demurred; "this hain't no time fer a gal ter be galavantin' around by herself in the night time. Hit's a-comin' up ter storm, an' ye've got thirty miles ter ride, an' thirty-five back ter yore house."

"I'm not scared," she replied. "I'm goin' an' I'm warnin' you now, if you do anything that Samson don't like, you'll have to answer to him, when he comes." She turned, walking very erect and dauntless to her sorrel mare, and disappeared at a gallop.

"I reckon," said Wile McCager, breaking the silence at last, "hit don't make no great dif'rence. He won't hardly come, nohow." Then, he added: "But thet boy is smart."

* * * * * *

Samson's return from Europe, after a year's study, was in the nature of a moderate triumph. With the art sponsorship of George Lescott, and the social sponsorship of Adrienne, he found that orders for portraits, from those who could pay munificently, seemed to seek him. He was tasting the novelty of being lionized.

That summer, Mrs. Lescott opened her house on Long Island early, and the life there was full of the sort of gaiety that comes to pleasant places when young men in flannels and girls in soft summery gowns and tanned cheeks are playing wholesomely, and singing tunefully, and making love—not too seriously.

Samson, tremendously busy these days in a new studio of his own, had run over for a week. Horton was, of course, of the party, and George Lescott was doing the honors as host. Besides these, all of whom regarded themselves as members of the family, there was a group of even younger folk, and the broad halls and terraces and tennis courts rang all day long with their laughter, and the floors trembled at night under the rhythmical tread of their dancing.

Off across the lawns and woodlands stretched the blue, sail-flecked waters of the Sound, and on the next hill rose the tile roofs and cream-white walls of the country club.

One evening, Adrienne left the dancers for the pergola, where she took refuge under a mass of honeysuckle.

Samson South followed her. She saw him coming, and smiled. She was contrasting this Samson, loosely clad in flannels, with the Samson she had first seen rising awkwardly to greet her in the studio.

"You should have stayed inside and made yourself agreeable to the girls," Adrienne reproved him, as he came up. "What's the use of making a lion of you, if you won't roar for the visitors?"

"I've been roaring," laughed the man. "I've just been explaining to Miss Willoughby that we only eat the people we kill in Kentucky on certain days of solemn observance and sacrifice. I wanted to be agreeable to you, Drennie, for a while."

The girl shook her head sternly, but she smiled and made a place for him at her side. She wondered what form his being agreeable to her would take.

"I wonder if the man or woman lives," mused Samson, "to whom the fragrance of honeysuckle doesn't bring back some old memory that is as strong—and sweet—as itself."

The girl did not at once answer him. The breeze was stirring the hair on her temples and neck. The moon was weaving a lace pattern on the ground, and filtering its silver light through the vines. At last, she asked:

"Do you ever find yourself homesick, Samson, these days?"

The man answered with a short laugh. Then, his words came softly, and not his own words, but those of one more eloquent:

"'Who hath desired the Sea? Her excellent loneliness
rather
"'Than the forecourts of kings, and her uttermost pits
than the streets where men gather. . . .
"'His Sea that his being fulfills?
"'So and no otherwise—so and no otherwise hillmen
desire their hills.'"

"And yet," she said, and a trace of the argumentative stole into her voice, "you haven't gone back."

"No." There was a note of self-reproach in his voice. "But soon I shall go. At least, for a time. I've been thinking a great deal lately about 'my fluttered folk and wild.' I'm just beginning to understand my relation to them, and my duty."

"Your duty is no more to go back there and throw away your life," she found herself instantly contending, "than it is the duty of the young eagle, who has learned to fly, to go back to the nest where he was hatched."

"But, Drennie," he said, gently, "suppose the young eagle is the only one that knows how to fly—and suppose he could teach the others? Don't you see? I've only seen it myself for a little while."

"What is it that—that you see now?"

"I must go back, not to relapse, but to come to be a constructive force. I must carry some of the outside world to Misery. I must take to them, because I am one of them, gifts that they would reject from other hands."

"Will they accept them even from you?"

"Drennie, you once said that, if I grew ashamed of my people, ashamed even of their boorish manners, their ignorance, their crudity, you would have no use for me."

"I still say that," she answered.

"Well, I'm not ashamed of them. I went through that, but it's over."

She sat silent for a while, then cried suddenly:

"I don't want you to go!" The moment she had said it, she caught herself with a nervous little laugh, and added a postscript of whimsical nonsense to disarm her utterance of its telltale feeling. "Why, I'm just getting you civilized, yourself. It took years to get your hair cut."

He ran his palm over his smoothly trimmed head, and laughed.

"Delilah, Oh, Delilah!" he said. "I was resolute, but you have shorn me."

"Don't!" she exclaimed. "Don't call me that!"

"Then, Drennie, dear," he answered, lightly, "don't dissuade me from the most decent resolve I have lately made."

From the house came the strains of an alluring waltz. For a little time, they listened without speech, then the girl said very gravely:

"You won't—you won't still feel bound to kill your enemies, will you, Samson?"

The man's face hardened.

"I believe I'd rather not talk about that. I shall have to win back the confidence I have lost. I shall have to take a place at the head of my clan by proving myself a man—and a man by their own standards. It is only at their head that I can lead them. If the lives of a few assassins have to be forfeited, I sha'n't hesitate at that. I shall stake my own against them fairly. The end is worth it."

The girl breathed deeply, then she heard Samson's voice again:

"Drennie, I want you to understand, that if I succeed it is your success. You took me raw and unfashioned, and you have made me. There is no way of thanking you."

"There is a way," she contradicted. "You can thank me by feeling just that way about it."

"Then, I do thank you."

She sat looking up at him, her eyes wide and questioning.

"Exactly what do you feel, Samson," she asked. "I mean about me?"

He leaned a little toward her, and the fragrance and subtle beauty of her stole into his veins and brain, in a sudden intoxication. His hand went out to seize hers. This beauty which would last and not wither into a hag's ugliness with the first breath of age—as mountain beauty does—was hypnotizing him. Then, he straightened and stood looking down.

"Don't ask me that, please," he said, in a carefully controlled voice. "I don't even want to ask myself. My God, Drennie, don't you see that I'm afraid to answer that?"

She rose from her seat, and stood for just an instant rather unsteadily before him, then she laughed.

"Samson, Samson!" she challenged. "The moon is making us as foolish as children. Old friend, we are growing silly. Let's go in, and be perfectly good hostesses and social lions."

SALLY WATCHES THE BLOODHOUNDS

The next afternoon, Adrienne and Samson were sitting with a gaily chattering group at the side lines of the tennis courts.

"When you go back to the mountains, Samson," Wilfred was suggesting, "we might form a partnership. "South, Horton and Co., development of coal and timber.' There are millions in it."

"Five years ago, I should have met you with a Winchester rifle," laughed the Kentuckian. "Now I shall not."

"I'll go with you, Horton, and make a sketch or two," volunteered George Lescott, who just then arrived from town. "And, by the way, Samson, here's a letter that came for you just as I left the studio."

The mountaineer took the envelope with a Hixon postmark, and for an instant gazed at it with a puzzled expression. It was addressed in a feminine hand, which he did not recognize. It was careful, but perfect, writing, such as one sees in a school copybook. With an apology he tore the covering, and read the letter. Adrienne, glancing at his face, saw it suddenly pale and grow as set and hard as marble.

Samson's eyes were dwelling with only partial comprehension on the script. This is what he read:

"DEAR SAMSON: The war is on again. Tamarack Spicer has killed Jim Asberry, and the Hollmans have killed Tamarack. Uncle Spicer is shot, but he may get well. There is nobody to lead the Souths. I am trying to hold them down until I hear from you. Don't come if you don't want to—but the gun is ready. With love, SALLY."

Slowly, Samson South came to his feet. His voice was in the dead-level pitch which Wilfred had once before heard. His eyes were as clear and hard as transparent flint.

"I'm sorry to be of trouble, George," he said, quietly. "But you must get me to New York at once—by motor. I must take a train South to-night."

"No bad news, I hope," suggested Lescott.

For an instant, Samson forgot his four years of veneer. The century of prenatal barbarism broke out fiercely. He was seeing things far away—and forgetting things near by. His eyes blazed and his fingers twitched.

"Hell, no!" he exclaimed. "The war's on, and my hands are freed!"

For an instant, as no one spoke, he stood breathing heavily, then, wheeling, rushed toward the house as though just across its threshold lay the fight into which he was aching to hurl himself.

CHAPTER XXV

SAMSON, throwing things hurriedly into his bag, heard a knock on his door. He opened it, and outside in the hall stood Adrienne. Her face was pale, and she leaned a little on the hand which rested against the white jamb.

"What does it mean?' she asked.

He came over.

"It means, Drennie," he said, "that you may make a pet of a leopard cub, but there will come a day when something of the jungle comes out in him—and he must go. My uncle has been shot, and the feud is on—I've been sent for."

He paused, and she half-whispered in an appealing voice:

"Don't go."

"You don't mean that," he said, quietly. "If it were you, you would go. Whether I get back here or not"— he hesitated—"my gratitude will be with you—always." He broke off, and said suddenly: "Drennie, I don't want to say good-by to you. I can't."

"It's not necessary yet," she answered. "I'm going to drive you to New York."

"No!" he exclaimed. "It's too far, and I've got to go fast——"

"That's why I'm going," she promptly assured him. "I'm the only fool on these premises that can get all the speed out of a car that's in her engine—and the constables are good to me. I just came up here to"—she hesitated, then added—"to see you alone for a moment, and to say that teacher has never had such a bright little pupil, in her life—and"—the flippancy with which she was masking her feeling broke and she added, in a shaken voice as she thrust out her hand, man-fashion—"and to say, God keep you, boy."

He seized the hand in both his own, and gripped it hard. He tried to speak, but only shook his head with a rueful smile.

"I'll be waiting at the door with the car," she told him, as she left.

Horton, too, came in to volunteer assistance.

"Wilfred," said Samson, feelingly, 'there isn't any man I'd rather have at my back, in a stand-up fight. But this isn't exactly that sort. Where I'm going, a fellow has got to be invisible. No, you can't help, now. Come down later. We'll organize Horton, South and Co."

"South, Horton and Co.," corrected Wilfred; "native sons first."

At that moment, Adrienne believed she had decided the long-mooted question. Of course, she had not. It was merely the stress of the moment; exaggerating the importance of one she was losing at the expense of the one who was left. Still, as she sat in the car waiting, her world seemed slipping into chaos under her feet, and, when Samson had taken his place at her side, the machine leaped forward into a reckless plunge of speed.

Samson stopped at his studio, and threw open an old closet where, from a littered pile of discarded background draperies, canvases and stretchers, he fished out a buried and dust-covered pair of saddlebags. They had long lain there forgotten, but they held the rusty clothes in which he had left Misery. He threw them over his arm and dropped them at Adrienne's feet, as he handed her the studio keys.

"Will you please have George look after things, and make the necessary excuses to my sitters? He'll find a list of posing appointments in the desk."

The girl nodded.

"What are those?" she asked, gazing at the great leather pockets as at some relic unearthed from Pompeian excavations.

"Saddlebags, Drennie," he said, "and in them are homespun and jeans. One can't lead his 'fluttered folk and wild' in a cutaway coat."

Shortly they were at the station, and the man, standing at the side of the machine, took her hand.

"It's not good-by, you know," he said, smiling. "Just *auf Wiedersehen.*"

She nodded and smiled, too, but, as she smiled, she shivered, and turned the car slowly. There was no need to hurry, now.

Samson had caught the fastest west-bound express on the schedule. In thirty-six hours, he would be at Hixon. There were many things which his brain must attack and digest in these hours. He must arrange his plan of action to its minutest detail, because he would have as little time for reflection, once he had reached his own country, as a wildcat flung into a pack of hounds.

From the railroad station to his home, he must make his way—most probably fight his way—through thirty miles of hostile territory where all the trails were watched. And yet, for the time, all that seemed too remotely unreal to hold his thoughts. He was seeing the coolly waving curtains of flowered chintz that stirred in the windows of his room at the Lescott house and the crimson ramblers that nodded against the sky. He was hearing a knock on the door, and seeing, as it opened, the figure of Adrienne Lescott and the look that had been in her eyes.

He took out Sally's letter, and read it once more. He read it mechanically and as a piece of news that had brought evil tidings. Then, suddenly, another aspect of it struck him—an aspect to which the shock of its reception had until this tardy moment blinded him. The letter was perfectly grammatical and penned in a hand of copy-book roundness and evenness. The address, the body of the missive, and the signature, were all in one chirography. She would not have intrusted the writing of this letter to any one else.

Sally had learned to write!

Moreover, at the end were the words "with love." It was all plain now. Sally had never repudiated him. She was declaring herself true to her mission and her love. All that heartbreak through which he had gone had been due to his own misconception, and in that misconception he had drawn into himself and had stopped writing to her. Even his occasional letters had for two years ceased to brighten her heart-strangling isolation—and she was still waiting. . . . She had sent no word of appeal until the moment had come of which she had promised to inform him. Sally, abandoned and alone, had been fighting her way up—that she might stand on his level.

"Good God!" groaned the man, in abjectly bitter self-contempt. His hand went involuntarily to his cropped head, and dropped with a gesture of self-doubting. He looked down at his tan shoes and silk socks. He rolled back his shirtsleeve and contemplated the forearm that had once been as brown and tough as leather. It was now the arm of a city man, except for the burning of one outdoor week. He was returning at the eleventh hour—stripped of the faith of his kinsmen, half-stripped of his faith in himself. If he were to realize the constructive dreams of which he had last night so confidently prattled to Adrienne, he must lead his people from under the blighting shadow of the feud.

Yet, if he was to lead them at all, he must first regain their shaken confidence, and to do that he must go, at their head, through this mire of war to vindication. Only a fighting South could hope to be heard in behalf of peace. His eventual regeneration belonged to some to-morrow. To-day held the need of such work as that of the first Samson—to slay.

He must reappear before his kinsmen as much as possible the boy who had left them—not the fop with newfangled affectations. His eyes fell upon the saddlebags on the floor of the Pullman, and he smiled satirically. He would like to step from the train at Hixon and walk brazenly through the town in those old clothes, challenging every hostile glance. If they shot him down on the streets, as they certainly would do, it would end his questioning and his anguish of dilemma. He would welcome that, but it would, after all, be shirking the issue.

He must get out of Hixon and into his own country unrecognized. The lean boy of four years ago was the somewhat filled out man now. The one concession that he had made to Paris life was the wearing of a closely cropped mustache. That he still wore—had worn it chiefly because he liked to hear Adrienne's humorous denunciation of it. He knew that, in his present guise and dress, he had an excellent chance of walking through the streets of Hixon as a stranger. And, after leaving Hixon, there was a mission to be performed at Jesse Purvy's store. As he thought of that mission a grim glint came to his pupils.

All journeys end, and as Samson passed through the tawdry cars of the local train near Hixon he saw several faces which he recognized, but they either eyed him in inexpressive silence, or gave him the greeting of the "furriner."

Then the whistle shrieked for the trestle over the Middle Fork, and at only a short distance rose the cupola of the brick court-house and the scattered roofs of the town. Scattered over the green slopes by the river bank lay the white spread of a tented company street, and, as he looked out, he saw uniformed figures moving to and fro, and caught the ring of a bugle call. So the militia was on deck; things must be bad, he reflected. He stood on the platform and looked down as the engine roared along the trestle. There were two gatling guns. One pointed its muzzle toward the town, and the other scowled up at the face of the mountain. Sentries paced their beats. Men in undershirts lay dozing outside tent flaps. It was all a picture of disciplined readiness, and yet Samson knew that soldiers made of painted tin would be equally effective. These military forces must remain subservient to local civil authorities, and the local civil authorities obeyed the nod of Judge Hollman and Jesse Purvy.

As Samson crossed the toll-bridge to the town proper he passed two brown-shirted militiamen, lounging on the rail of the middle span. They grinned at him, and, recognizing the outsider from his clothes, one of them commented:

"Ain't this the hell of a town?"

"It's going to be," replied Samson, enigmatically, as he went on.

Still unrecognized, he hired a horse at the livery stable, and for two hours rode in silence, save for the easy creaking of his stirrup leathers and the soft thud of hoofs.

The silence soothed him. The brooding hills lulled his spirit as a crooning song lulls a fretful child. Mile after mile unrolled forgotten vistas. Something deep in himself murmured:

"Home!"

It was late afternoon when he saw ahead of him the orchard of Purvy's place, and read on the store wall, a little more weather-stained, but otherwise unchanged:

"Jesse Purvy, General Merchandise."

The porch of the store was empty, ana as Samson flung himself from his saddle there was no one to greet him. This was surprising, since, ordinarily, two or three of Purvy's personal guardsmen loafed at the front to watch the road. Just now the guard should logically be doubled. Samson still wore his Eastern clothes —for he wanted to go through that door unknown. As Samson South he could not cross its threshold either way. But when he stepped up on to the rough porch flooring no one challenged his advance. The yard and orchard were quiet from their front fence to the grisly stockade at the rear, and, wondering at these things, the young man stood for a moment looking about at the afternoon peace before he announced himself.

Yet Samson had not come to the stronghold of his enemy for the purpose of assassination. There had been another object in his mind—an utterly mad idea, it is true, yet so bold of conception that it held a ghost of promise. He had meant to go into Jesse Purvy's store and chat artlessly, like some inquisitive "furriner." He would ask questions which by their very impertinence might be forgiven on the score of a stranger's folly. But, most of all, he wanted to drop the casual information, which he should assume to have heard on the train, that Samson South was returning, and to mark, on the assassin leader, the effect of the news. In his new code it was necessary to give at least the rattler's warning before he struck, and he meant to strike. If he were recognized, well—he shrugged his shoulders.

But as he stood on the outside, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, for the ride had been warm, he heard voices within. They were loud and angry voices. It occurred to him that by remaining where he was he might gain more information than by hurrying in.

"I've done been your executioner fer twenty years," complained a voice, which Samson at once recognized as that of Aaron Hollis, the most trusted of Purvy's personal guards. "I hain't never laid down on ye yet. Me an' Jim Asberry killed old Henry South. We laid fer his boy, an' would 'a' got him ef ye'd only said ther word. I went inter Hixon, an' killed Tam'rack Spicer, with soldiers all round me. There hain't no other damn fool in these mountings would 'a' took such a long chance es thet. I'm tired of hit. They're a-goin' ter git me, an' I wants ter leave, an' you won't come clean with the price of a railroad ticket to Oklahoma. Now, damn yore stingy soul, I gits that ticket or I gits you!"

"Aaron, ye can't scare me into doin' nothin' I ain't aimin' to do." The old baron of the vendetta spoke in a cold, stoical voice. "I tell ye I ain't quite through with ye yet. In due an' proper time I'll see that ye get yer ticket." Then he added, with conciliating softness: "We've been friends a long while. Let's talk this thing over before we fall out."

"Thar hain't nothin' ter talk over," stormed Aaron. "Ye're jest tryin' ter kill time till the boys gits hyar, and then I reckon ye 'lows ter have me kilt like yer've had me kill them others. Hit hain't no use. I've done sent 'em away. When they gits back hyar, either you'll be in hell, or I'll be on my way outen the mountings."

Samson stood rigid. Here was the confession of one murderer, with no denial from the other. The truce was off. Why should he wait? Cataracts seemed to thunder in his brain, and yet he stood there, his hand in his coat-pocket, clutching the grip of a magazine pistol. Samson South the old, and Samson South the new, were writhing in the life-and-death grapple of two codes. Then, before decision came, he heard a sharp report inside, and the heavy fall of a body to the floor.

A wildly excited figure came plunging through the door, and Samson's left hand swept out, and seized its shoulder in a sudden vise grip.

"Do you know me?" he inquired, as the mountaineer pulled away and crouched back with startled surprise and vicious frenzy.

"No, damn ye! Git outen my road!" Aaron thrust his cocked rifle close against the stranger's face. From its muzzle came the acrid stench of freshly burned powder. "Git outen my road afore I kills ye!"

"My name is Samson South."

Before the astounded finger on the rifle trigger could be crooked, Samson's pistol spoke from the pocket, and, as though in echo, the rifle blazed, a little too late and a shade too high, over his head, as the dead man's arms went up.

CHAPTER XXVI

EXCEPT for those two reports there was no sound. Samson stood still, anticipating an uproar of alarm. Now, he should doubtless have to pay with his life for both the deaths which would inevitably and logically be attributed to his agency. But, strangely enough, no clamor arose. The shot inside had been muffled, and those outside, broken by the intervening store, did not arouse the house. Purvy's bodyguard had been sent away by Hollis on a false alarm. Only the "womenfolks" and children remained indoors, and they were drowning with a piano any sounds that might have come from without. That piano was the chief emblem of Purvy's wealth. It represented the acme of "having things hung up"; that ancient and expressive phrase, which had come down from days when the pioneers' worldly condition was gauged by the hams hanging in the smokehouse and the peppers, tobacco and herbs strung high against the rafters.

Now, Samson South stood looking down, uninterrupted, on what had been Aaron Hollis as it lay motionless at his feet. There was a powder-burned hole in the butternut shirt, and only a slender thread of blood trickled into the dirt-grimed cracks between the planks. The body was twisted sidewise, in one of those grotesque attitudes with which a sudden summons so frequently robs the greatest phenomenon of all its rightful dignity. The sun was gilding the roadside clods, and burnishing the greens of the treetops. The breeze was harping sleepily among the branches, and several geese stalked pompously along the creek's edge. On the top of the stockade a gray squirrel, sole witness to the tragedy, rose on his haunches, flirted his brush, and then, in a sudden leap of alarm, disappeared.

Samson turned to the darkened doorway. Inside was emptiness, except for the other body, which had crumpled forward and face down across the counter. A glance showed that Jesse Purvy would no more fight back the coming of death. He was quite unarmed. Behind his spent body ranged shelves of general merchandise. Boxes of sardines and cans of peaches were lined in homely array above him. His lifeless hand rested as though flung out in an oratorical gesture on a bolt of blue calico.

Samson paused only for a momentary survey. His score was clean. He would not again have to agonize over the dilemma of old ethics and new. To-morrow, the word would spread like wildfire along Misery and Crippleshin, that Samson South was back, and that his coming had been signalized by these two deaths. The fact that he was responsible for only one—and that in self-defense—would not matter. They would prefer to believe that he had invaded the store and killed Purvy, and that Hollis had fallen in his master's defense at the threshold. Samson went out, still meeting no one, and continued his journey.

Dusk was falling, when he hitched his horse in a clump of timber, and, lifting his saddlebags, began climbing to a cabin that sat far back in a thicketed cove. He was now well within South territory, and the need of masquerade had ended.

The cabin had not, for years, been occupied. Its rooftree was leaning askew under rotting shingles. The doorstep was ivy-covered, and the stones of the hearth were broken. But it lay well hidden, and would serve his purposes.

Shortly, a candle flickered inside, before a small hand mirror. Scissors and safety razor were for a while busy. The man who entered in impeccable clothes emerged fifteen minutes later—transformed. There appeared under the rising June crescent, a smooth-faced native, clad in stained store-clothes, with rough woolen socks showing at his brogan tops, and a battered felt hat drawn over his face. No one who had known the Samson South of four years ago would fail to recognize him now. And the strangest part, he told himself, was that he felt the old Samson. He no longer doubted his courage. He had come home, and his conscience was once more clear.

The mountain roads and the mountain sides themselves were sweetly silent. Moon mist engulfed the flats in a lake of dreams, and, as the livery-stable horse halted to pant at the top of the final ridge, he could see below him his destination.

The smaller knobs rose like little islands out of the vapor, and yonder, catching the moonlight like scraps of gray paper, were two roofs: that of his uncle's house—and that of the Widow Miller.

At a point where a hand-bridge crossed the skirting creek, the boy dismounted. Ahead of him lay the stile where he had said good-by to Sally. The place was dark, and the chimney smokeless, but, as he came nearer, holding the shadows of the trees, he saw one sliver of light at the bottom of a solid shutter; the shutter of Sally's room. Yet, for a while, Samson stopped there, looking and making no sound. He stood at his Rubicon—and behind him lay all the glitter and culture of that other world, a world that had been good to him.

That was to Samson South one of those pregnant and portentous moments with which life sometimes punctuates its turning points. At such times, all the set and solidified strata that go into the building of a man's nature may be uptossed and rearranged. So, the layers of a mountain chain and a continent that have for centuries remained steadfast may break and alter under the stirring of earthquake or volcano, dropping heights under water and throwing new ranges above the sea.

There was passing before his eyes as he stood there, pausing, a panorama much vaster than any he had been able to conceive when last he stood there. He was seeing in review the old life and the new, lurid with contrasts, and, as the pictures of things thousands of miles away rose before his eyes as clearly as the serried backbone of the ridges, he was comparing and settling for all time the actual values and proportions of the things in his life.

He saw the streets of Paris and New York, brilliant under their strings of opalescent lights; the *Champs Elysées* ran in its smooth, tree-trimmed parquetry from the *Place de Concorde* to the *Arc de Triomphe*, and the chatter and music of its cafés rang in his ears. The ivory spaces of Rome, from the Pincian Hill where his

TOGETHER AGAIN

fancy saw almond trees in bloom to the *Piazza Venezia*, spread their eternal story before his imagination. He saw 'buses and hansoms slirring through the mud and fog of London and the endless *pot-pourri* of Manhattan. All the things that the outside world had to offer; all that had ever stirred his pulses to a worship of the beautiful, the harmonious, the excellent, rose in exact value. Then, he saw again the sunrise as it would be to-morrow morning over these ragged hills. He saw the mists rise and grow wisp-like, and the disc of the sun gain color, and all the miracles of cannoning tempest and caressing calm—and, though he had come back to fight, a wonderful peace settled over him, for he knew that, if he must choose these, his native hills, or all the rest, he would forego all the rest.

And Sally—would she be changed? His heart was hammering wildly now. Sally had remained loyal. It was a miracle, but it was the one thing that counted. He was going to her, and nothing else mattered. All the questions of dilemma were answered. He was Samson South come back to his own—to Sally, and the rifle. Nothing had changed! The same trees raised the same crests against the same sky. For every one of them, he felt a throb of deep emotion. Best of all, he himself had not changed in any cardinal respect, though he had come through changes and perplexities.

He lifted his head, and sent out a long, clear whip-poorwill call, which quavered on the night much like the other calls in the black hills around him. After a moment, he went nearer, in the shadow of a poplar, and repeated the call.

Then, the cabin-door opened. Its jamb framed a patch of yellow candlelight, and, at the center, a slender silhouetted figure, in a fluttering, eager attitude of uncertainty. The figure turned slightly to one side, and, as it did so, the man saw clasped in her right hand the rifle, which had been his mission, bequeathed to her in trust. He saw, too, the delicate outline of her profile, with anxiously parted lips and a red halo about her soft hair. He watched the eager heave of her breast, and the spasmodic clutching of the gun to her heart. For four years, he had not given that familiar signal. Possibly, it had lost some of its characteristic quality, for she still seemed in doubt. She hesitated, and the man, invisible in the shadow, once more imitated the bird-note, but this time it was so low and soft that it seemed the voice of a whispering whippoorwill.

Then, with a sudden glad little cry, she came running with her old fleet grace down to the road.

Samson had vaulted the stile, and stood in the full moonlight. As he saw her coming he stretched out his arms and his voice broke from his throat in a half-hoarse, passionate cry:

"Sally!"

It was the only word he could have spoken just then, but it was all that was necessary. It told her everything. It was an outburst from a heart too full of emotion to grope after speech, the cry of a man for the One Woman who alone can call forth an inflection more eloquent than phrases and poetry. And, as she came into his outstretched arms as straight and direct as a homing pigeon, they closed about her in a convulsive grip that held her straining to him, almost crushing her in the tempest of his emotion.

For a time, there was no speech, but to each of them it seemed that their tumultuous heart-beating must sound above the night music, and the telegraphy of heart-beats tells enough. Later, they would talk, but now, with a gloriously wild sense of being together, with a mutual intoxication of joy because all that they had dreamed was true, and all that they had feared was untrue, they stood there under the skies clasping each other—with the rifle between their breasts. Then as he held her close, he wondered that a shadow of doubt could ever have existed. He wondered if, except in some nightmare of hallucination, it had ever existed.

The flutter of her heart was like that of a rapturous bird, and the play of her breath on his face like the fragrance of the elder blossoms.

These were their stars twinkling overhead. These were their hills, and their moon was smiling on their tryst.

He had gone and seen the world that lured him: he had met its difficulties, and faced its puzzles. He had even felt his feet wandering at the last from the path that led back to her, and now, with her lithe figure close held in his embrace, and her red-brown hair brushing his temples, he marveled how such an instant of doubt could have existed. He knew only that the silver of the moon and the kiss of the breeze and the clasp of her soft arms about his neck were all parts of one great miracle. And she, who had waited and almost despaired, not taking count of what she had suffered, felt her knees grow weak, and her head grow dizzy with sheer happiness, and wondered if it were not too marvelous to be true. And, looking very steadfastly into his eyes, she saw there the gleam that once had frightened her; the gleam that spoke of something stronger and more compelling than his love. It no longer frightened her, but made her soul sing, though it was more intense than it had ever been before, for now she knew that it was She herself who brought it to his pupils—and that nothing would ever be stronger.

But they had much to say to each other, and, finally, Samson broke the silence:

"Did ye think I wasn't a-comin' back, Sally?" he questioned, softly. At that moment, he had no realization that his tongue had ever fashioned smoother phrases. And she, too, who had been making war on crude idioms, forgot, as she answered:

"Ye done said ye was comin'." Then, she added a happy lie: "I knowed plumb shore ye'd do hit."

After a while, she drew away, and said, slowly:

"Samson, I've done kept the old rifle-gun ready fer ye. Ye said ye'd need it bad when ye come back, an' I've took care of it."

She stood there holding it, and her voice dropped almost to a whisper as she added:

"It's been a lot of comfort to me sometimes, because it was your'n. I knew if ye stopped keerin' fer me, ye wouldn't let me keep it—an' as long as I had it, I—" She broke off, and the fingers of one hand touched the weapon caressingly.

The man knew many things now that he had not known when he said good-by. He recognized in the very gesture with which she stroked the old walnut stock the pathetic heart-hunger of a nature which had been denied the fulfillment of its strength, and which had been bestowing on an inanimate object something that might almost have been the stirring of the mother instinct for a child. Now, thank God, her life should never lack anything that a flood-tide of love could bring to it. He bent his head in a mute sort of reverence.

After a long while, they found time for the less-wonderful things.

"I got your letter," he said, seriously, "and I came at once." As he began to speak of concrete facts, he dropped again into ordinary English, and did not know that he had changed his manner of speech.

For an instant, Sally looked up into his face, then with a sudden laugh, she informed him:

"I can say, 'isn't,' instead of, 'hain't,' too. How did you like my writing?"

He held her off at arms' length, and looked at her pridefully, but under his gaze her eyes fell, and her face flushed with a sudden diffidence and a new shyness of realization. She wore a calico dress, but at her throat was a soft little bow of ribbon. She was no longer the totally unself-conscious wood-nymph, though as natural and instinctive as in the other days. Suddenly, she drew away from him a little, and her hands went slowly to her breast, and rested there. She was fronting a great crisis, but, in the first flush of joy, she had forgotten it. She had spent lonely nights struggling for rudiments; she had sought and fought to refashion herself, so that, if he came, he need not be ashamed of her. And now he had come, and, with a terrible clarity and distinctness, she realized how pitifully little she had been able to accomplish. Would she pass muster? She stood there before him, frightened, self-conscious and palpitating, then her voice came in a whisper:

"Samson, dear, I'm not holdin' you to any promise. Those things we said were a long time back. Maybe we'd better forget 'em now, and begin all over again."

But, again, he crushed her in his arms, and his voice rose triumphantly:

"Sally, I have no promises to take back, and you have made none that I'm ever going to let you take back—not while life lasts!"

Her laugh was the delicious music of happiness.

"I don't want to take them back," she said. Then, suddenly, she added, importantly: "I wear shoes and stockings now, and I've been to school a little. I'm awfully—awfully ignorant, Samson, but I've started, and I reckon you can teach me."

His voice choked. Then, her hands strayed up, and clasped themselves about his head.

"Oh, Samson," she cried, as though someone had struck her, "you've cut yore ha'r."

"It will grow again," he laughed. But he wished that he had not had to make that excuse. Then, being honest, he told her all about Adrienne Lescott—even about how, after he believed that he had been outcast by his uncle and herself, he had had his moments of doubt. Now that it was all so clear, now that there could never be doubt, he wanted the woman who had been so true a friend to know the girl whom he loved. He loved them both, but was in love with only one. He wanted to present to Sally the friend who had made him, and to the friend who had made him the Sally of whom he was proud. He wanted to tell Adrienne that now he could answer her question—that each of them meant to the other exactly the same thing: they were friends of the rarer sort, who had for a little time been in danger of mistaking their comradeship for passion.

As they talked, sitting on the stile, Sally held the rifle across her knees. Except for their own voices and the soft chorus of night sounds, the hills were wrapped in silence—a silence as soft as velvet. Suddenly, in a pause, there came to the girl's ears the cracking of a twig in the woods. With the old instinctive training of the mountains, she leaped noiselessly down, and for an instant stood listening with intent ears. Then, in a low, tense whisper, as she thrust the gun into the man's hands, she cautioned:

"Git out of sight. Maybe they've done found out ye've come back—maybe they're trailin' ye!"

With an instant shock, she remembered what mission had brought him back, and what was his peril; and he, too, for whom the happiness of the moment had swallowed up other things, came back to a recognition of facts. Dropping into the old woodcraft, he melted out of sight into the shadow, thrusting the girl behind him, and crouched against the fence, throwing the rifle forward, and peering into the shadows. As he stood there, balancing the gun once more in his hands, old instincts began to stir, old battle hunger to rise, and old realizations of primitive things to assault him. Then, when they had waited with bated breath until they were both reassured, he rose and swung the stock to his shoulder several times. With something like a sigh of contentment, he said, half to himself:

"Hit feels mighty natural ter throw this old rifle-gun up. I reckon maybe I kin still shoot hit."

"I learned some things down there at school, Samson," said the girl, slowly, "and I wish—I wish you didn't have to use it."

"Jim Asberry is dead," said the man, gravely.

"Yes," she echoed, "Jim Asberry's dead." She stopped there. Yet, her sigh completed the sentence as though she had added, "but he was only one of several. Your vow went farther."

After a moment's pause, Samson added:

"Jesse Purvy's dead."

The girl drew back, with a frightened gasp. She knew what this meant, or thought she did.

"Jesse Purvy!" she repeated. "Oh, Samson, did ye—?" She broke off, and covered her face with her hands.

"No, Sally," he told her. "I didn't have to." He recited the day's occurrences, and they sat together on the stile, until the moon had sunk to the ridge top.

* * * * * *

Captain Sidney Callomb, who had been despatched in command of a militia company to quell the trouble in the mountains, should have been a soldier by profession. All his enthusiasms were martial. His precision was military. His cool eye held a note of command which made itself obeyed. He had a rare gift of handling men, which made them ready to execute the impossible. But the elder Callomb had trained his son to succeed him at the head of a railroad system, and the young man had philosophically undertaken to satisfy his military ambitions with State Guard shoulder-straps.

The deepest sorrow and mortification he had ever known was that which came to him when Tamarack Spicer, his prisoner of war and a man who had been surrendered on the strength of his personal guarantee, had been assassinated before his eyes. That the manner of this killing had been so outrageously treacherous that it could hardly have been guarded against, failed to bring him solace. It had shown the inefficiency of his efforts, and had brought on a carnival of blood-letting, when he had come here to safeguard against that danger. In some fashion, he must make amends. He realized, too, and it rankled deeply, that his men were not being genuinely used to serve the State, but as instruments of the Hollmans, and he had seen enough to distrust the Hollmans. Here, in Hixon, he was seeing things from only one angle. He meant to learn something more impartial.

Besides being on duty as an officer of militia, Callomb was a Kentuckian, interested in the problems of his Commonwealth, and, when he went back, he knew that his cousin, who occupied the executive mansion at Frankfort, would be interested in his suggestions. The Governor had asked him to report his impressions, and he meant to form them after analysis.

So, smarting under his impotency, Captain Callomb came out of his tent one morning, and strolled across the curved bridge to the town proper. He knew that the Grand Jury was convening, and he meant to sit as a spectator in the court-house and study proceedings when they were instructed.

But before he reached the court-house, where for a half-hour yet the cupola bell would not clang out its summons to veniremen and witnesses, he found fresh fuel for his wrath.

He was not a popular man with these clansmen, though involuntarily he had been useful in leading their victims to the slaughter. There was a scowl in his eyes that they did not like, and an arrogant hint of iron laws in the livery he wore, which their instincts distrusted.

Callomb saw without being told that over the town lay a sense of portentous tidings. Faces were more sullen than usual. Men fell into scowling knots and groups. A clerk at a store where he stopped for tobacco inquired as he made change:

"Heered the news, stranger?"

"What news?"

"This here 'Wildcat' Samson South come back yistiddy, an' last evenin' towards sundown, Jesse Purvy an' Aaron Hollis was shot dead."

For an instant, the soldier stood looking at the young clerk, his eyes kindling into a wrathful blaze. Then, he cursed under his breath. At the door, he turned on his heel:

"Where can Judge Smithers be found at this time of day?" he demanded.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE Honorable Asa Smithers was not the regular Judge of the Circuit which numbered Hixon among its county-seats. The elected incumbent was ill, and Smithers had been named as his pro-tem. successor. Callomb climbed to the second story of the frame bank building, and pounded loudly on a door, which bore the boldly typed shingle:

"ASA SMITHERS, ATTORNEY-AT-LAW."

The temporary Judge admitted a visitor in uniform, whose countenance was stormy with indignant protest. The Judge himself was placid and smiling. The lawyer, who was for the time being exalted to the bench, hoped to ascend it more permanently by the votes of the Hollman faction, since only Hollman votes were counted. He was a young man of powerful physique with a face ruggedly strong and honest.

It was such an honest and fearless face that it was extremely valuable to its owner in concealing a crookedness as resourceful as that of a fox, and a moral cowardice which made him a spineless tool in evil hands. A shock of tumbled red hair over a fighting face added to the appearance of combative strength. The Honorable Asa was conventionally dressed, and his linen was white, but his collar was innocent of a necktie. Callomb stood for a moment inside the door, and, when he spoke, it was to demand crisply:

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"About what, Captain?" inquired the other, mildly.

"Is it possible you haven't heard? Since yesterday noon, two more murders have been added to the holocaust. You represent the courts of law. I represent the military arm of the State. Are we going to stand by and see this go on?"

The Judge shook his head, and his visage was sternly thoughtful and hypocritical. He did not mention that he had just come from conference with the Hollman leaders. He did not explain that the venire he had drawn from the jury drum had borne a singularly solid Hollman complection.

"Until the Grand Jury acts, I don't see that we can take any steps."

"And," stormed Captain Callomb, "the Grand Jury will, like former Grand Juries, lie down in terror and inactivity. Either there are no courageous men in your county, or these panels are selected to avoid including them."

Judge Smithers' face darkened. If he was a moral coward, he was at least a coward crouching behind a seeming of fearlessness.

"Captain," he said, coolly, but with a dangerous hint of warning, "I don't see that your duties include contempt of court."

"No!" Callomb was now thoroughly angered, and his voice rose. "I am sent down here subject to your orders, and it seems you are also subject to orders. Here are two murders in a day, capping a climax of twenty years of bloodshed. You have information as to the arrival of a man known as a desperado with a grudge against the two dead men, yet you know of no steps to take. Give me the word, and I'll go out and bring that man, and any others you name, to your bar of justice—if it is a bar of justice! For God's sake, give me something else to do than to bring in prisoners to be shot down in cold blood."

The Judge sat balancing a pencil on his extended forefinger as though it were a scale of justice.

"You have been heated in your language, sir," he said, sternly, "but it is a heat arising from an indignation which I share. Consequently, I pass it over. I cannot instruct you to arrest Samson South before the Grand Jury has accused him. The law does not contemplate hasty or unadvised action. All men are innocent until proven guilty. If the Grand Jury wants South, I'll instruct you to go and get him. Until then, you may leave my part of the work to me."

His Honor rose from his chair.

"You can at least give this Grand Jury such instructions on murder as will point out their duty. You can assure them that the militia will protect them. Through your prosecutor, you can bring evidence to their attention, you——"

"If you will excuse me," interrupted His Honor, drily, "I'll judge of how I am to charge my Grand Jury. I have been in communication with the family of Mr. Purvy, and it is not their wish at the present time to bring this case before the panel."

Callomb laughed ironically.

"No, I could have told you that before you conferred with them. I could have told you that they prefer to be their own courts and executioners, except where they need you. They also preferred to have me get a man they couldn't take themselves, and then to assassinate him in my hands. Who in the hell do you work for, Judge-for-the-moment Smithers? Are you holding a job under the State of Kentucky, or under the Hollman faction of this feud? I am instructed to take my orders from you. Will you kindly tell me my master's real name?"

Smithers turned pale with anger, his fighting face grew as truculent as a bulldog's, while Callomb stood glaring back at him like a second bulldog, but the Judge knew that he was being honestly and fearlessly accused. He merely pointed to the door. The Captain turned on his heel, and stalked out of the place, and the Judge came down the steps, and crossed the street to the court-house. Five minutes later, he turned to the shirt-sleeved man who was leaning on the bench, and said in his most judicial voice:

"Mr. Sheriff, open court."

The next day the mail-carrier brought in a note for the temporary Judge. His Honor read it at recess, and hastened across to Hollman's Mammoth Department Store. There, in council with his masters, he asked instructions. This was the note:

"THE HON. ASA SMITHERS.

"SIR: I arrived in this county yesterday, and am prepared, if called as a witness, to give to the Grand Jury full and true particulars of the murder of Jesse Purvy and the killing of Aaron Hollis. I am willing to come under escort of my own kinsmen, or of the militiamen, as the Court may advise.

"The requirement of any bodyguard, I deplore, but in meeting my legal obligations, I do not regard it as necessary or proper to walk into a trap.

"Respectfully, SAMSON SOUTH."

Smithers looked perplexedly at Judge Hollman.

"Shall I have him come?" he inquired.

Hollman threw the letter down on his desk with a burst of blasphemy:

"Have him come?" he echoed. "Hell and damnation, no! What do we want him to come here and spill the milk for? When we get ready, we'll indict him. Then, let your damned soldiers go after him—as a criminal, not a witness. After that, we'll continue this case until these outsiders go away, and we can operate to suit ourselves. We don't fall for Samson South's tricks. No, sir; you never got that letter! It miscarried. Do you hear? You never got it."

Smithers nodded grudging acquiescence. Most men would rather be independent officials than collar-wearers.

Out on Misery Samson South had gladdened the soul of his uncle with his return. The old man was mending, and, for a long time, the two had talked. The failing head of the clan looked vainly for signs of degeneration in his nephew, and, failing to find them, was happy.

"Hev ye decided, Samson," he inquired, "thet ye was right in yer notion 'bout goin' away?"

Samson sat reflectively for a while, then replied:

"We were both right, Uncle Spicer—and both wrong. This is my place, but if I'm to take up the leadership it must be in a different fashion. Changes are coming. We can't any longer stand still."

Spicer South lighted his pipe. He, too, in these last years, had seen in the distance the crest of the oncoming wave. He, too, recognized that, from within or without, there must be a regeneration. He did not welcome it, but, if it must come, he preferred that it come not at the hands of conquerors, but under the leadership of his own blood.

"I reckon there's right smart truth to that," he acknowledged. "I've been studyin' 'bout hit consid'able myself of late. Thar's been sev'ral fellers through the country talkin' coal an' timber an' railroads—an' sich like."

Sally went to mill that Saturday, and with her rode Samson. There, besides Wile McCager, he met Caleb Wiley and several others. At first, they received him sceptically, but they knew of the visit to Purvy's store, and they were willing to admit that in part at least he had erased the blot from his escutcheon. Then, too, except for cropped hair and a white skin, he had come back as he had gone, in homespun and hickory. There was nothing highfalutin in his manners. In short, the impression was good.

"I reckon now that ye're back, Samson," suggested McCager, "an' seein' how yore Uncle Spicer is gettin' along all right, I'll jest let the two of ye run things. I've done had enough." It was a simple fashion of resigning a regency, but effectual.

Old Caleb, however, still insurgent and unconvinced, brought in a minority report.

"We wants fightin' men," he grumbled, with the senile reiteration of his age, as he spat tobacco and beat a rat-tat on the mill floor with his long hickory staff. "We don't want no deserters."

"Samson ain't a deserter," defended Sally. "There isn't one of you fit to tie his shoes." Sally and old Spicer South alone knew of her lover's letter to the Circuit Judge, and they were pledged to secrecy.

"Never mind, Sally!" It was Samson himself who answered her. "I didn't come back because I care what men like old Caleb think. I came back because they needed me. The proof of a fighting man is his fighting, I reckon. I'm willing to let 'em judge me by what I'm going to do."

So, Samson slipped back, tentatively, at least, into his place as clan head, though for a time he found it a post without action. After the fierce outburst of bloodshed, quiet had settled, and it was tacitly understood that, unless the Hollman forces had some *coup* in mind which they were secreting, this peace would last until the soldiers were withdrawn.

"When the world's a-lookin'," commented Judge Hollman, "hit's a right good idea to crawl under a log—an' lay still."

Purvy had been too famous a feudist to pass unsung. Reporters came as far as Hixon, gathered there such news as the Hollmans chose to give them, and went back to write lurid stories and description, from hearsay, of the stockaded seat of tragedy. Nor did they overlook the dramatic coincidence of the return of "Wildcat" Samson South from civilization to savagery. They made no accusation, but they pointed an inference and a moral —as they thought. It was a sermon on the triumph of heredity over the advantages of environment. Adrienne read some of these saffron misrepresentations, and they distressed her.

* * * * * *

Meanwhile, it came insistently to the ears of Captain Callomb that some plan was on foot, the intricacies of which he could not fathom, to manufacture a case against a number of the Souths, quite apart from their actual guilt, or likelihood of guilt. Once more, he would be called upon to go out and drag in men too well fortified to be taken by the posses and deputies of the Hollman civil machinery. At this news, he chafed bitterly, and, still rankling with a sense of shame at the loss of his first prisoner, he formed a plan of his own, which he revealed over his pipe to his First Lieutenant.

"There's a nigger in the woodpile, Merriwether," he said. "We are simply being used to do the dirty work up here, and I'm going to do a little probing of my own. I guess I'll turn the company over to you for a day or two."

"What idiocy are you contemplating now?" inquired the second in command.

"I'm going to ride over on Misery, and hear what the other side has to say. I've usually noticed that one side of any story is pretty good until the other's told."

"You mean you are going to go over there where the Souths are intrenched, where every road is guarded?" The Lieutenant spoke wrathfully and with violence. "Don't be an ass, Callomb. You went over there once before, and took a man away—and he's dead. You owe them a life, and they collect their dues. You will be supported by no warrant of arrest, and can't take a sufficient detail to protect you."

"No," said Callomb, quietly; "I go on my own responsibility and I go by myself."

"And," stormed Merriwether, "you'll never come back."

"I think," smiled Callomb, "I'll get back. I owe an old man over there an apology, and I want to see this desperado at first hand."

"It's sheer madness. I ought to take you down to this infernal crook of a Judge, and have you committed to a strait-jacket."

"If," said Callomb, "you are content to play the catspaw to a bunch of assassins, I'm not. The mail-rider went out this morning, and he carried a letter to old Spicer South. I told him that I was coming unescorted and unarmed, and that my object was to talk with him. I asked him to give me a safe-conduct, at least until I reached his house, and stated my case. I treated him like an officer and a gentleman, and, unless I'm a poor judge of men, he's going to treat me that way."

The Lieutenant sought vainly to dissuade Callomb, but the next day the Captain rode forth, unaccompanied. Curious stares followed him, and Judge Smithers turned narrowing and unpleasant eyes after him, but at the point where the ridge separated the territory of the Hollmans from that of the Souths, he saw waiting in the road a mounted figure, sitting his horse straight, and clad in the rough habiliments of the mountaineer.

As Callomb rode up he saluted, and the mounted figure with perfect gravity and correctness returned that salute as one officer to another. The Captain was surprised. Where had this mountaineer with the steady eyes and the clean-cut jaw learned the niceties of military etiquette?

"I am Captain Callomb of F Company," said the officer. "I'm riding over to Spicer South's house. Did you come to meet me?"

"To meet and guide you," replied a pleasant voice. "My name is Samson South."

The militiaman stared. This man whose countenance was calmly thoughtful scarcely comported with the descriptions he had heard of the "Wildcat of the Mountains"; the man who had come home straight as a storm-petrel at the first note of tempest, and marked his coming with double murder. Callomb had been too busy to read newspapers of late. He had heard only that Samson had "been away."

While he wondered, Samson went on:

"I'm glad you came. If it had been possible I would have come to you." As he told of the letter he had written the Judge, volunteering to present himself as a witness, the officer's wonder grew.

"They said that you had been away," suggested Callomb. "If it's not an impertinent question, what part of the mountains have you been visiting?"

Samson laughed.

"Not any part of the mountains," he said. "I've been living chiefly in New York—and for a time in Paris."

Callomb drew his horse to a dead halt.

"In the name of God," he incredulously asked, "what manner of man are you?"

"I hope," came the instant reply, "it may be summed up by saying that I'm exactly the opposite of the man you've had described for you back there at Hixon."

"I knew it," exclaimed the soldier, "I knew that I was being fed on lies! That's why I came. I wanted to get the straight of it, and I felt that the solution lay over here."

They rode the rest of the way in deep conversation. Samson outlined his ambitions for his people. He told, too, of the scene that had been enacted at Purvy's store. Callomb listened with absorption, feeling that the narrative bore axiomatic truth on its face.

At last he inquired:

"Did you succeed up there—as a painter?"

"That's a long road," Samson told him, "but I think I had a fair start. I was getting commissions when I left."

"Then, I am to understand"—the officer met the steady gray eyes and put the question like a cross-examiner bullying a witness—"I am to understand that you deliberately put behind you a career to come down here and herd these fence-jumping sheep?"

"Hardly that," deprecated the head of the Souths. "They sent for me—that's all. Of course, I had to come."

"Why?"

"Because they had sent. They are my people."

The officer leaned in his saddle.

"South," he said, "would you mind shaking hands with me? Some day, I want to brag about it to my grandchildren."

CHAPTER XXVIII

CALLOMB spent the night at the house of Spicer South. He met and talked with a number of the kinsmen, and, if he read in the eyes of some of them a smoldering and unforgiving remembrance of his unkept pledge, at least they repressed all expression of censure.

With Spicer South and Samson, the Captain talked long into the night. He made many jottings in a notebook. He, with Samson abetting him, pointed out to the older and more stubborn man the necessity of a new régime in the mountains, under which the individual could walk in greater personal safety. As for the younger South, the officer felt, when he rode away the next morning, that he had discovered the one man who combined with the courage and honesty that many of his clansmen shared the mental equipment and local influence to prove a constructive leader.

When he returned to the Bluegrass, he meant to have a long and unofficial talk with his relative, the Governor.

He rode back to the ridge with a strong bodyguard. Upon this Samson had insisted. He had learned of Callomb's hasty and unwise denunciation of Smithers, and he knew that Smithers had lost no time in relating it to his masters. Callomb would be safe enough in Hollman country, because the faction which had called for troops could not afford to let him be killed within their own precincts. But, if Callomb could be shot down in his uniform, under circumstances which seemed to bear the earmarks of South authorship, it would arouse in the State at large a tidal wave of resentment against the Souths, which they could never hope to stem. And so, lest one of Hollman's hired assassins should succeed in slipping across the ridge and waylaying him, Samson conducted him to the frontier of the ridge.

On reaching Hixon, Callomb apologized to Judge Smithers for his recent outburst of temper. Now that he understood the hand that gentleman was playing, he wished to be strategic and in a position of seeming accord. He must match craft against craft. He did not intimate that he knew of Samson's letter, and rather encouraged the idea that he had been received on Misery with surly and grudging hospitality.

Smithers, presuming that the Souths still burned with anger over the shooting of Tamarack, swallowed that bait, and was beguiled.

The Grand Jury trooped each day to the court-house and transacted its business. The petty juries went and came, occupied with several minor homicide cases. The Captain, from a chair, which Judge Smithers had ordered placed beside him on the bench, was looking on and intently studying. One morning, Smithers confided to him that in a day or two more the Grand Jury would bring in a true bill against Samson South, charging him with murder. The officer did not show surprise. He merely nodded.

"I suppose I'll be called on to go and get him?"

"I'm afraid we'll have to ask you to do that."

"What caused the change of heart? I thought

Purvy's people didn't want it done." It was Callomb's first allusion, except for his apology, to their former altercation.

For an instant only, Smithers was a little confused.

"To be quite frank with you, Callomb," he said, "I got to thinking over the matter in the light of your own viewpoint, and, after due deliberation, I came to see that to the State at large it might bear the same appearance. So, I had the Grand Jury take the matter up. We must stamp out such lawlessness as Samson South stands for. He is the more dangerous because he has brains."

Callomb nodded, but, at noon, he slipped out on a pretense of sight-seeing, and rode by a somewhat circuitous route to the ridge. At nightfall, he came to the house of the clan head.

"South," he said to Samson, when he had led him aside, "they didn't want to hear what you had to tell the Grand Jury, but they are going ahead to indict you on manufactured evidence."

Samson was for a moment thoughtful, then he nodded.

"That's about what I was expecting."

"Now," went on Callomb, "we understand each other. We are working for the same end, and, by God! I've had one experience in making arrests at the order of that Court. I don't want it to happen again."

"I suppose," said Samson, "you know that while I am entirely willing to face any fair court of justice, I don't propose to walk into a packed jury, whose only object is to get me where I can be made way with. Callomb, I hope we won't have to fight each other. What do you suggest?"

"If the Court orders the militia to make an arrest, the militia has no option. In the long run, resistance would only alienate the sympathy of the world at large. There is just one thing to be done, South. It's a thing I don't like to suggest, and a thing which, if we were not fighting the devil with fire, it would be traitorous for me to suggest." He paused, then added emphatically: "When my detail arrives here, which will probably be in three or four days, you must not be here. You must not be in any place where we can find you."

For a little while, Samson looked at the other man with a slow smile of amusement, but soon it died, and his face grew hard and determined.

"I'm obliged to you, Callomb," he said, seriously. "It was more than I had the right to expect—this warning. I understand the cost of giving it. But it's no use. I can't cut and run. No, by God, you wouldn't do it! You can't ask me to do it."

"By God, you can and will!" Callomb spoke with determination. "This isn't a time for quibbling. You've got work to do. We both have work to do. We can't stand on a matter of vainglorious pride, and let big issues of humanity go to pot. We haven't the right to spend men's lives in fighting each other, when we are the only two men in this entanglement who are in perfect accord—and honest."

The mountaineer spent some minutes in silent self-debate. The working of his face under the play of alternating doubt, resolution, hatred and insurgency, told the militiaman what a struggle was progressing. At last, Samson's eyes cleared with an expression of discovered solution.

"All right, Callomb," he said, briefly, "you won't find me!" He smiled, as he added: "Make as thorough a search as your duty demands. It needn't be perfunctory or superficial. Every South cabin will stand open to you. I shall be extremely busy, to ends which you will approve. I can't tell you what I shall be doing, because to do that, I should have to tell where I mean to be."

In two days, the Grand Jury, with much secrecy, returned a true bill, and a day later a considerable detachment of infantry started on a dusty hike up Misery. Furtive and inscrutable Hollman eyes along the way watched them from cabin-doors, and counted them. They meant also to count them coming back, and they did not expect the totals to tally.

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Back of an iron spiked fence, and a dusty sunburned lawn, the barrack-like façades of the old Administration Building and Kentucky State Capitol frowned on the street and railroad track. About it, on two sides of the Kentucky River, sprawled the town of Frankfort; sleepy, more or less disheveled at the center, and stretching to shaded environs of Colonial houses set in lawns of rich bluegrass, amid the shade of forest trees. Circling the town in an embrace of quiet beauty rose the Kentucky River hills.

Turning in to the gate of the State House enclosure, a man, who seemed to be an Easterner by the cut of his clothes, walked slowly up the brick walk, and passed around the fountain at the front of the Capitol. He smiled to himself as his wandering eyes caught the distant walls and roofs of the State Prison on the hillside. His steps carried him direct to the main entrance of the Administration Building, and, having paused a moment in the rotunda, he entered the Secretary's office of the Executive suite, and asked for an interview with the Governor. The Secretary, whose duties were in part playing Cerberus at that threshold, made his customary swift, though unobtrusive, survey of the applicant for audience, and saw nothing to excite suspicion.

"Have you an appointment?" he asked.

The visitor shook his head. Scribbling a brief note on a slip of paper, he enclosed it in an envelope and handed it to his questioner.

"You must pardon my seeming mysteriousness," he said, "but, if you will let me send in that note, I think the Governor will see me."

Once more the Secretary studied his man with a slightly puzzled air, then nodded and went through the door that gave admission to the Executive's office..

His Excellency opened the envelope, and his face showed an expression of surprise. He raised his brows questioningly.

"Rough-looking sort?" he inquired. "Mountaineer?"

"No, sir. New Yorker would be my guess. Is there anything suspicious?"

"I guess not." The Governor laughed. "Rather extraordinary note, but send him in."

Through his eastern window, the Governor gazed off across the hills of South Frankfort, to the ribbon of river that came down from the troublesome hills.. Then, hearing a movement at his back, he turned, and his eyes took in a well-dressed figure with confidence-inspiring features.

He picked up the slip from his desk, and, for a moment, stood comparing the name and the message with the man who had sent them in. There seemed to be in his mind some irreconcilable contradiction between the two. With a slightly frowning seriousness, the Executive suggested:

"This note says that you are Samson South, and that you want to see me with reference to a pardon. Whose pardon is it, Mr. South?"

"My own, sir."

The Governor raised his brows, slightly.

"Your pardon for what? The newspapers do not even report that you have yet been indicted." He shaded the word "yet" with a slight emphasis.

"I think I have been indicted within the past day or two. I'm not sure myself."

The Governor continued to stare. The impression he had formed of the "Wildcat" from press dispatches was warring with the pleasing personal presence of this visitor. Then, his forehead wrinkled under his black hair, and his lips drew themselves sternly.

"You have come to me too soon, sir," he said curtly. "The pardoning power is a thing to be most cautiously used at all times, and certainly never until the courts have acted. A case not yet adjudicated cannot address itself to executive clemency."

Samson nodded.

"Quite true," he admitted. "If I announced that I had come on the matter of a pardon, it was largely that I had to state some business and that seemed the briefest way of putting it."

"Then, there is something else?"

"Yes. If it were only a plea for clemency, I should expect the matter to be chiefly important to myself. In point of fact, I hope to make it equally interesting to you. Whether you give me a pardon in a fashion which violates all precedent, or whether I surrender myself, and go back to a trial which will be merely a form of assassination, rests entirely with you, sir. You will not find me insistent."

"If," said the Governor, with a trace of warning in his voice, "your preamble is simply a device to pique my interest with its unheard-of novelty, I may as well confess that so far it has succeeded."

"In that case, sir," responded Samson, gravely, "I have scored a point. If, when I am through, you find that I have been employing a subterfuge, I fancy a touch of that bell under your finger will give you the means of summoning an officer. I am ready to turn myself over."

Then, Samson launched into the story of his desires and the details of conditions which outside influences had been powerless to remedy—because they were outside influences. Some man of sufficient vigor and comprehension, acting from the center of disturbance, must be armed with the power to undertake the housecleaning, and for a while must do work that would not be pretty. As far as he was personally concerned, a pardon after trial would be a matter of purely academic interest. He could not expect to survive a trial. He was at present able to hold the Souths in leash. If the Governor was not of that mind, he was now ready to surrender himself, and permit matters to take their course.

"And now, Mr. South?" suggested the Governor, after a half-hour of absorbed listening. "There is one point you have overlooked. Since in the end the whole thing comes back to the exercise of the pardoning power, it is after all the crux of the situation. You may be able to render such services as those for which you volunteer. Let us for the moment assume that to be true. You have not yet told me a very important thing. Did you or did you not kill Purvy and Hollis?"

"I killed Hollis," said Samson, as though he were answering a question as to the time of day, "and I did not kill Purvy."

"Kindly," suggested the Governor, "give me the full particulars of that affair."

The two were still closeted, when a second visitor called, and was told that his Excellency could not be disturbed. The second visitor, however, was so insistent that the secretary finally consented to take in the card. After a glance at it, his chief ordered admission.

The door opened, and Captain Callomb entered.

He was now in civilian clothes, with portentous news written on his face. He paused in annoyance at the sight of a second figure standing with back turned at the window. Then Samson wheeled, and the two men recognized each other. They had met before only when one was in olive drab; the other in jeans and butternut. At recognition, Callomb's face fell, and grew troubled.

"You here, South!" he exclaimed. "I thought you promised me that I shouldn't find you. God knows I didn't want to meet you."

"Nor I you," Samson spoke slowly. "I supposed you'd be raking the hills."

Neither of them was for the moment paying the least attention to the Governor, who stood quietly looking on.

"I sent Merriwether out there," explained Callomb, impatiently. "I wanted to come here before it was too late. God knows, South, I wouldn't have had this meeting occur for anything under heaven. It leaves me no choice. You are indicted on two counts, each charging you with murder." The officer took a step toward the center of the room. His face was weary, and his eyes wore the deep disgust and fatigue that come from the necessity of performing a hard duty.

"You are under arrest," he added quietly, but his composure broke as he stormed. "Now, by God, I've got to take you back and let them murder you, and you're the one man who might have been useful to the State."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE Governor had been more influenced by watching the two as they talked than by what he had heard.

"It seems to me, gentlemen," he suggested quietly, "that you are both overlooking my presence." He turned to Callomb.

"Your coming, Sid, unless it was prearranged between the two of you (which, since I know you, I know was not the case) has shed more light on this matter than the testimony of a dozen witnesses. After all, I'm still the Governor."

The militiaman seemed to have forgotten the existence of his distinguished kinsman, and, at the voice, his eyes came away from the face of the man he had not wanted to capture, and he shook his head.

"You are merely the head of the executive branch," he said. "You are as helpless here as I am. Neither of us can interfere with the judicial gentry, though we may know that they stink to high heaven with the stench of blood. After a conviction, you can pardon, but a pardon won't help the dead. I don't see that you can do much of anything, Crit."

"I don't know yet what I can do, but I can tell you I'm going to do something," said the Governor. "You can just begin watching me. In the meantime, I believe I am Commander-in-Chief of the State troops."

"And I am Captain of F Company, but all I can do is to obey the orders of a bunch of Borgias."

"As your superior officer," smiled the Governor, "I can give you orders. I'm going to give you one now. Mr. South has applied to me for a pardon in advance of trial. Technically, I have the power to grant that request. Morally, I doubt my right. Certainly, I shall not do it without a very thorough sifting of evidence and grave consideration of the necessities of the case—as well as the danger of the precedent. However, I am considering it, and for the present you will parole your prisoner in my custody. Mr. South, you will not leave Frankfort without my permission. You will take every precaution to conceal your actual identity. You will treat as utterly confidential all that has transpired here—and, above all, you will not let newspaper men discover you. Those are my orders. Report here to-morrow afternoon, and remember that you are my prisoner."

Samson bowed, and left the two cousins together, where shortly they were joined by the Attorney General. That evening, the three dined at the executive mansion, and sat until midnight in the Governor's private office, still deep in discussion. During the long session, Callomb opened the bulky volume of the Kentucky Statutes, and laid his finger on Section 2673.

"There's the rub," he protested, reading aloud: 'The military shall be at all times, and in all cases, in strict subordination to the civil power.' "

The Governor glanced down to the next paragraph, and read in part: " 'The Governor may direct the commanding officer of the military force to report to any one of the following-named officers of the district in which the said force is employed: Mayor of a city, sheriff, jailer or marshal.' "

"Which list," stormed Callomb, "is the honor roll of the assassins."

"At all events"—the Governor had derived from Callomb much information as to Samson South which the mountaineer himself had modestly withheld—"South gets his pardon. That is only a step. I wish I could make him satrap over his province, and provide him with troops to rule it. Unfortunately, our form of government has its drawbacks."

"It might be possible," ventured the Attorney General, "to impeach the Sheriff, and appoint this or some other suitable man to fill the vacancy until the next election."

"The Legislature doesn't meet until next winter," objected Callomb. "There is one chance. The Sheriff down there is a sick man. Let us hope he may die."

One day, the Hixon conclave met in the room over Hollman's Mammoth Department Store, and with much profanity read a communication from Frankfort, announcing the pardon of Samson South. In that episode, they foresaw the beginning of the end for their dynasty. The outside world was looking on, and their régime could not survive the spotlight of law-loving scrutiny.

"The fust thing," declared Judge Hollman, curtly, "is to get rid of these damned soldiers. We'll attend to our own business later, and we don't want them watchin' us. Just now, we want to lie mighty quiet for a spell—teetotally quiet until I pass the word."

Samson had won back the confidence of his tribe, and enlisted the faith of the State administration. He had been authorized to organize a local militia company, and to drill them, provided he could stand answerable for their conduct. The younger Souths took gleefully to that idea. The mountain boy makes a good soldier, once he has grasped the idea of discipline. For ten weeks, they drilled daily in squads and weekly in platoons. Then, the fortuitous came to pass. Sheriff Forbin died, leaving behind him an unexpired term of two years, and Samson was summoned hastily to Frankfort. He returned, bearing his commission as High Sheriff, though, when that news reached Hixon, there were few men who envied him his post, and none who cared to bet that he would live to take his oath of office.

That August court day was a memorable one in Hixon. Samson South was coming to town to take up his duties. Every one recognized it as the day of final issue, and one that could hardly pass without bloodshed. The Hollmans, standing in their last trench, saw only the blunt question of Hollman-South supremacy. For years, the feud had flared and slept and broken again into eruption, but never before had a South sought to throw his outposts of power across the waters of Crippleshin, and into the county seat. That the present South came bearing commission as an officer of the law only made his effrontery the more unendurable.

Samson had not called for outside troops. The drilling and disciplining of his own company had progressed in silence along the waters of Misery. They were a slouching, unmilitary band of uniformed vagabonds, but they were longing to fight, and Callomb had been with them, tirelessly whipping them into rudimentary shape. After all, they were as much partisans as they had been before they were issued State rifles. The battle, if it came, would be as factional as the fight of twenty-five years ago, when the Hollmans held the store and the Souths the court-house. But back of all that lay one essential difference, and it was this difference that had urged the Governor to stretch the forms of law and put such dangerous power into the hands of one man. That difference was the man himself. He was to take drastic steps, but he was to take them under the forms of law, and the State Executive believed that, having gone through worse to better, he would maintain the improved condition.

Early that morning, men began to assemble along the streets of Hixon; and to congregate into sullen clumps with set faces that denoted a grim, unsmiling determination. Not only the Hollmans from the town and immediate neighborhood were there, but their shaggier, fiercer brethren from remote creeks and coves, who came only at urgent call, and did not come without intent of vindicating their presence. Old Jake Hollman, from "over yon" on the headwaters of Dryhole Creek, brought his son and fourteen-year-old grandson, and all of them carried Winchesters. Long before the hour for the court-house bell to sound the call which would bring matters to a crisis, women disappeared from the streets, and front shutters and doors closed themselves. At last, the Souths began to ride in by half-dozens, and to hitch their horses at the racks. They, also, fell into groups well apart. The two factions eyed each other somberly, sometimes nodding or exchanging greetings, for the time had not yet come to fight. Slowly, however, the Hollmans began centering about the court-house. They swarmed in the yard, and entered the empty jail, and overran the halls and offices of the building itself. They took their places massed at the windows. The Souths, now coming in a solid stream, flowed with equal unanimity to McEwer's Hotel, near the square, and disappeared inside. Besides their rifles, they carried saddlebags, but not one of the uniforms which some of these bags contained, nor one of the cartridge belts, had yet been exposed to view.

Stores opened, but only for a desultory pretense of business. Horsemen led their mounts away from the more public racks, and tethered them to back fences and willow branches in the shelter of the river banks, where stray bullets would not find them.

The dawn that morning had still been gray when Samson South and Captain Callomb had passed the Miller cabin. Callomb had ridden slowly on around the turn of the road, and waited a quarter of a mile away. He was to command the militia that day, if the High Sheriff should call upon him. Samson went in and knocked, and instantly to the cabin door came Sally's slender, fluttering figure. She put both arms about him, and her eyes, as she looked into his face, were terrified, but tearless.

"I'm frightened, Samson," she whispered. "God knows I'm going to be praying all this day."

"Sally," he said, softly, "I'm coming back to you—but, if I don't"—he held her very close—"Uncle Spicer has my will. The farm is full of coal, and days are coming when roads will take it out, and every ridge will glow with coke furnaces. That farm will make you rich, if we win to-day's fight."

"Don't!" she cried, with a sudden gasp. "Don't talk like that."

"I must," he said, gently. "I want you to make me a promise, Sally."

"It's made," she declared.

"If, by any chance I should not come back, I want you to hold Uncle Spicer and old Wile McCager to their pledge. They must not privately avenge me. They must still stand for the law. I want you, and this is most important of all, to leave these mountains——"

Her hands tightened on his shoulders.

"Not that, Samson," she pleaded; "not these mountains where we've been together."

"You promised. I want you to go to the Lescotts in New York. In a year, you can come back—if you want to; but you must promise that."

"I promise," she reluctantly yielded.

It was half-past nine o'clock when Samson South and Sidney Callomb rode side by side into Hixon from the east. A dozen of the older Souths, who had not become soldiers, met them there, and, with no word, separated to close about them in a circle of protection. As Callomb's eyes swept the almost deserted streets, so silent that the strident switching of a freight train could be heard down at the edge of town, he shook his head. As he met the sullen glances of the gathering in the court-house yard, he turned to Samson.

"They'll fight," he said, briefly.

Samson nodded.

"I don't understand the method," demurred the officer, with perplexity. "Why don't they shoot you at once. What are they waiting for?"

"They want to see," Samson assured him, "what tack I mean to take. They want to let the thing play itself out. They're inquisitive—and they're cautious, because now they are bucking the State and the world."

Samson with his escort rode up to the court-house door, and dismounted. He was for the moment unarmed, and his men walked on each side of him, while the onlooking Hollmans stood back in surly silence to let him pass. In the office of the County Judge, Samson said briefly:

"I want to get my deputies sworn in."

"We've got plenty deputy sheriffs," was the quietly insolent rejoinder.

"Not now—we haven't any." Samson's voice was sharply incisive. "I'll name my own assistants."

"What's the matter with these boys?" The County Judge waved his hand toward two hold-over deputies.

"They're fired."

The County Judge laughed.

"Well, I reckon I can't attend to that right now."

"Then, you refuse?"

"Mebby you might call it that."

Samson leaned on the Judge's table, and rapped sharply with his knuckles. His handful of men stood close, and Callomb caught his breath, in the heavy air of storm-freighted suspense. The Hollman partisans filled the room, and others were crowding to the doors.

"I'm High Sheriff of this County now," said Samson, sharply. "You are County Judge. Do we coöperate—or fight?"

"I reckon," drawled the other, "that's a matter we'll work out as we goes along. Depends on how obedient ye air."

"I'm responsible for the peace and quiet of this County," continued Samson. "We're going to have peace and quiet."

The Judge looked about him. The indications did not appear to him indicative of peace and quiet.

"Air we?" he inquired.

"I'm coming back here in a half-hour," said the new Sheriff. "This is an unlawful and armed assembly. When I get back, I want to find the court-house occupied only by unarmed citizens who have business here."

"When ye comes back," suggested the County Judge, "I'd advise that ye resigns yore job. A half-hour is about es long as ye ought ter try ter hold hit."

Samson turned and walked through the scowling crowd to the court-house steps.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a clear, far-carrying voice, "there is no need of an armed congregation at this court-house. I call on you in the name of the law to lay aside your arms or scatter."

There was murmur which for an instant threatened to become a roar, but trailed into a chorus of derisive laughter.

Samson went to the hotel, accompanied by Callomb. A half-hour later, the two were back at the court-house, with a half-dozen companions. The yard was empty. Samson carried his father's rifle. In that half-hour

ADRIENE'S WORLD ACCEPTS SAMPSON

a telegram, prepared in advance, had flashed to Frankfort.

"Mob holds court-house—need troops."

And a reply had flashed back:

"Use local company—Callomb commanding." So that form of law was met.

The court-house doors were closed, and its windows barricaded. The place was no longer a judicial building. It was a fortress. As Samson's party paused at the gate, a warning voice called:

"Don't come no nigher!"

The body-guard began dropping back to shelter.

"I demand admission to the court-house to make arrests," shouted the new Sheriff. In answer, a spattering of rifle reports came from the jail windows. Two of the Souths fell. At a nod from Samson, Callomb left on a run for the hotel. The Sheriff himself took his position in a small store across the street, which he reached unhurt under a desultory fire.

Then, again, silence settled on the town, to remain for five minutes unbroken. The sun glared mercilessly on clay streets, now as empty as a cemetery. A single horse incautiously hitched at the side of the court-house switched its tail against the assaults of the flies. Otherwise, there was no outward sign of life. Then, Callomb's newly organized force of ragamuffin soldiers clattered down the street at double time. For a moment or two after they came into sight, only the massed uniforms caught the eyes of the intrenched Hollmans, and an alarmed murmur broke from the court-house. They had seen no troops detrain, or pitch camp. These men had sprung from the earth as startlingly as Jason's crop of dragon's teeth. But, when the command rounded the shoulder of a protecting wall to await further orders, the ragged stride of their marching, and the all-too-obvious bearing of the mountaineer proclaimed them native amateurs. The murmur turned to a howl of derision and challenge. They were nothing more nor less than South, masquerading in the uniforms of soldiers.

"What orders?" inquired Callomb briefly, joining Samson in the store.

"Demand surrender once more—then take the court-house and jail," was the short reply.

There was little conversation in the ranks of the new company, but their faces grew black as they listened to the jeers and insults across the way, and they greedily fingered their freshly issued rifles. They would be ready when the command of execution came. Callomb himself went forward with the flag of truce. He shouted his message, and a bearded man came to the court-house door.

"Tell 'em," he said without redundancy, "thet we're all here. Come an' git us."

The officer went back, and distributed his forces under such cover as offered itself, about the four walls. Then, a volley was fired over the roof, and instantly the two buildings in the public square awoke to a volcanic response of rifle fire.

All day, the duel between the streets and county buildings went on with desultory intervals of quiet and wild outbursts of musketry. The troops were firing as sharpshooters, and the court-house, too, had its sharpshooters. When a head showed itself at a barricaded window, a report from the outside greeted it. Samson was everywhere, his rifle smoking and hot-barreled. His life seemed protected by a talisman. Yet, most of the firing, after the first hour, was from within. The troops were, except for occasional pot shots, holding their fire. There was neither food nor water inside the building, and at last night closed and the cordon drew tighter to prevent escape. The Hollmans, like rats in a trap, grimly held on, realizing that it was to be a siege. On the following morning, a detachment of F Company arrived, dragging two gatling guns. The Hollmans saw them detraining, from their lookout in the court-house cupola, and, realizing that the end had come, resolved upon a desperate sortie. Simultaneously, every door and lower window of the court-house burst open to discharge a frenzied rush of men, firing as they came. They meant to eat their way out and leave as many hostile dead as possible in their wake. Their one chance now was to scatter before the machine-guns came into action. They came like a flood of human lava, and their guns were never silent, as they bore down on the barricades, where the single outnumbered company seemed insufficient to hold them. But the new militiamen, looking for reassurance not so much to Callomb as to the granite-like face of Samson South, rallied, and rose with a yell to meet them on bayonet and smoking muzzle. The rush wavered, fell back, desperately rallied, then broke in scattered remnants for the shelter of the building.

Old Jake Hollman fell near the door, and his grandson, rushing out, picked up his fallen rifle, and sent farewell defiance from it, as he, too, threw up both arms and dropped.

Then, a white flag wavered at a window, and, as the newly arrived troops halted in the street, the noise died suddenly to quiet. Samson went out to meet a man who opened the door, and said shortly:

"We lays down."

Judge Hollman, who had not participated, turned from the slit in his shuttered window, through which he had since the beginning been watching the conflict.

"That ends it!" he said, with a despairing shrug of his shoulders. He picked up a magazine pistol which lay on his table, and, carefully counting down his chest to the fifth rib, placed the muzzle against his breast.

CHAPTER XXX

BEFORE the mountain roads were mired with the coming of the rains, and while the air held its sparkle of autumnal zestfulness, Samson South wrote to Wilfred Horton that, if he still meant to come to the hills for his inspection of coal and timber, the time was ripe. Soon, men would appear bearing transit and chain, drawing a line which a railroad was to follow to Misery and across it to the heart of untouched forests and coal-fields. With that wave of innovation would come the speculators. Besides, Samson's fingers were itching to be out in the hills with a palette and a sheaf of brushes in the society of George Lescott.

For a while after the battle at Hixon, the county had lain in a torpid paralysis of dread. Many illiterate feudists on each side remembered the directing and exposed figure of Samson South seen through eddies of gun smoke, and believed him immune from death. With Purvy dead and Hollman the victim of his own hand, the backbone of the murder syndicate was broken. Its heart had ceased to beat. Those Hollman survivors who bore the potentialities for leadership had not only signed pledges of peace, but were afraid to break them; and the triumphant Souths, instead of vaunting their victory, had subscribed to the doctrine of order, and declared the war over. Souths who broke the law were as speedily arrested as Hollmans. Their boys were drilling as militiamen, and—wonder of wonders!—inviting the sons of the enemy to join them. Of course, these things changed gradually, but the beginnings of them were most noticeable in the first few months, just as a newly painted and renovated house is more conspicuous than one that has been long respectable.

Hollman's Mammoth Department Store passed into new hands, and trafficked only in merchandise, and the town was open to the men and women of Misery as well as those of Crippleshin.

These things Samson had explained in his letters to the Lescotts and Horton. Men from down below could still find trouble in the wink of an eye, by seeking it, for under all transformation the nature of the individual remained much the same; but, without seeking to give offense, they could ride as securely through the hills as through the streets of a policed city—and meet a readier hospitality.

And, when these things were discussed and the two men prepared to cross the Mason-and-Dixon line and visit the Cumberlands, Adrienne promptly and definitely announced that she would accompany her brother. No argument was effective to dissuade her, and after all Lescott, who had been there, saw no good reason why she should not go with him. He had brought Samson North. He had made a hazardous experiment which subsequent events had more than vindicated, and yet, in one respect, he feared that there had been failure. He had promised Sally that her lover would return to her with undeflected loyalty. Had he done so? Lescott had been glad that his sister should have undertaken the part of Samson's molding, which only a woman's hand could accomplish, and he had been glad of the strong friendship that had grown between them. But, if that friendship had come to mean something more sentimental, his experiment had been successful at the cost of unsuccess. He had said little, but watched much, and he had known that, after receiving a certain letter from Samson South, his sister had seemed strangely quiet and distressed. These four young persons had snarled their lives in perplexity. They could definitely find themselves and permanently adjust themselves, only by meeting on common ground. Perhaps, Samson had shone in an exaggerated high-light of fascination by the strong contrast into which New York had thrown him. Wilfred Horton had the right to be seen also in contrast with mountain life, and then only could the girl decide for all time and irrevocably. The painter learns something of confused values.

Horton himself had seen small reason for a growth of hope in these months, but he, like Lescott, felt that the matter must come to issue, and he was not of that type which shrinks from putting to the touch a question of vital consequence. He knew that her happiness as well as his own was in the balance. He was not embittered or deluded, as a narrower man might have been, into the fallacy that her treatment of him denoted fickleness. Adrienne was merely running the boundary line that separates deep friendship from love, a boundary which is often confusing. When she had finally staked out the disputed frontier, it would never again be questioned. But on which side he would find himself, he did not know.

At Hixon, they found that deceptive air of serenity which made the history of less than three months ago seem paradoxical and fantastically unreal. Only about the court-house square where numerous small holes in frame walls told of fusillades, and in the interior of the building itself where the woodwork was scarred and torn, and the plaster freshly patched, did they find grimly reminiscent evidence.

Samson had not met them at the town, because he wished their first impressions of his people to reach them uninfluenced by his escort. It was a form of the mountain pride—an honest resolve to soften nothing, and make no apologies. But they found arrangements made for horses and saddlebags, and the girl discovered that for her had been provided a mount as evenly gaited as any in her own stables.

When she and her two companions came out to the hotel porch to start, they found a guide waiting, who said he was instructed to take them as far as the ridge, where the Sheriff himself would be waiting, and the cavalcade struck into the hills. Men at whose houses they paused to ask a dipper of water, or to make an inquiry, gravely advised that they "had better light, and stay all night." In the coloring forests, squirrels scampered and scurried out of sight, and here and there on the tall slopes they saw shy-looking children regarding them with inquisitive eyes.

The guide led them silently, gazing in frank amazement, though deferential politeness, at this girl in corduroys, who rode cross-saddle, and rode so well. Yet, it was evident that he would have preferred talking had not diffidence restrained him. He was a young man and rather handsome in a shaggy, unkempt way. Across one cheek ran a long scar still red, and the girl, looking into his clear, intelligent eyes, wondered what that scar stood for. Adrienne had the power of melting masculine diffidence, and her smile as she rode at his side, and asked, "What is your name?" brought an answering smile to his grim lips.

"Joe Hollman, ma'am," he answered; and the girl gave an involuntary start. The two men who caught the name closed up the gap between the horses, with suddenly piqued interest.

"Hollman!" exclaimed the girl. "Then, you—" She stopped and flushed. "I beg your pardon," she said, quickly.

"That's all right," reassured the man. "I know what ye're a-thinkin', but I hain't takin' no offense. The High Sheriff sent me over. I'm one of his deputies."

"Were you"—she paused, and added rather timidly —"were you in the court-house?"

He nodded, and with a brown forefinger traced the scar on his cheek.

"Samson South done that thar with his rifle-gun," he enlightened. "He's a funny sort of feller, is Samson South."

"How?" she asked.

"Wall, he licked us, an' he licked us so plumb damn hard we was skeered ter fight ag'in, an' then, 'stid of tramplin' on us, he turned right 'round, an' made me a deputy. My brother's a corporal in this hyar newfangled milishy. I reckon this time the peace is goin' ter last. Hit's a mighty funny way ter act, but 'pears like it works all right."

Then, at the ridge, the girl's heart gave a sudden bound, for there at the highest point, where the road went up and dipped again, waited the mounted figure of Samson South, and, as they came into sight, he waved his felt hat, and rode down to meet them.

"Greetings!" he shouted. Then, as he leaned over and took Adrienne's hand, he added: "The Goops send you their welcome." His smile was unchanged, but the girl noted that his hair had again grown long.

Finally, as the sun was setting, they reached a roadside cabin, and the mountaineer said briefly to the other men:

"You fellows ride on. I want Drennie to stop with me a moment. We'll join you later."

Lescott nodded. He remembered the cabin of the Widow Miller, and Horton rode with him, albeit grudgingly.

Adrienne sprang lightly to the ground, laughingly rejecting Samson's assistance, and came with him to the top of a stile, from which he pointed to the log cabin, set back in its small yard, wherein geese and chickens picked industriously about in the sandy earth.

A huge poplar and a great oak nodded to each other at either side of the door, and over the walls a clambering profusion of honeysuckle vine contended with a mass of wild grape, in joint effort to hide the white chinking between the dark logs. From the crude milk-benches to the sweep of the well, every note was one of neatness and rustic charm. Slowly, he said, looking straight into her eyes:

"This is Sally's cabin, Drennie."

He watched her expression, and her lips curved up in the same sweetness of smile that had first captivated and helped to mold him.

"It's lovely!" she cried, with frank delight. "It's a picture."

"Wait!" he commanded. Then, turning toward the house, he sent out the long, peculiarly mournful call of the whippoorwill, and, at the signal, the door opened, and on the threshold Adrienne saw a slender figure. She had called the cabin with its shaded dooryard a picture, but now she knew she had been wrong. It was only a background. It was the girl herself who made and completed the picture. She stood there in the wild simplicity that artists seek vainly to reproduce in posed figures. Her red calico dress was patched, but fell in graceful lines to her slim bare ankles, though the first faint frosts had already fallen.

Her red-brown hair hung loose and in masses about the oval of a face in which the half-parted lips were dashes of scarlet, and the eyes large violet pools. She stood with her little chin tilted in a half-wild attitude of reconnoiter, as a fawn might have stood. One brown arm and hand rested on the door frame, and, as she saw the other woman, she colored adorably.

Adrienne thought she had never seen so instinctively and unaffectedly lovely a face or figure. Then the girl came down the steps and ran toward them.

"Drennie," said the man, "this is Sally. I want you two to love each other." For an instant, Adrienne Lescott stood looking at the mountain girl, and then she opened both her arms.

"Sally," she cried, "you adorable child, I do love you!"

The girl in the calico dress raised her face, and her eyes were glistening.

"I'm obleeged ter ye," she faltered. Then, with open and wondering admiration she stood gazing at the first "fine lady" upon whom her glance had ever fallen.

Samson went over and took Sally's hand.

"Drennie," he said, softly, "is there anything the matter with her?"

Adrienne Lescott shook her head.

"I understand," she said.

"I sent the others on," he went on quietly, "because I wanted that first we three should meet alone. George and Wilfred are going to stop at my uncle's house, but, unless you'd rather have it otherwise, Sally wants you here."

"Do I stop now?" the girl asked.

But the man shook his head.

"I want you to meet my other people first."

As they rode at a walk along the little shred of road left to them, the man turned gravely.

"Drennie," he began, "she waited for me, all those years. What I was helped to do by such splendid friends as you and your brother and Wilfred, she was back here trying to do for herself. I told you back there the night before I left that I was afraid to let myself question my feelings toward you. Do you remember?"

She met his eyes, and her own eyes were frankly smiling.

"You were very complimentary, Samson," she told him. "I warned you then that it was the moon talking."

"No," he said firmly, "it was not the moon. I have since then met that fear, and analyzed it. My feeling for you is the best that a man can have, the honest worship of friendship. And," he added, "I have analyzed your feeling for me, too, and, thank God! I have that same friendship from you. Haven't I?"

For a moment, she only nodded; but her eyes were bent on the road ahead of her. The man waited in tense silence. Then, she raised her face, and it was a face that smiled with the serenity of one who has wakened out of a troubled dream.

"You will always have that, Samson, dear," she assured him.

"Have I enough of it, to ask you to do for her what you did for me? To take her and teach her the things she has the right to know?"

"I'd love it," she cried. And then she smiled, as she added: "She will be much easier to teach. She won't be so stupid, and one of the things I shall teach her"—she paused, and added whimsically—"will be to make you cut your hair again."

But, just before they drew up at the house of old Spicer South, she said:

"I might as well make a clean breast of it, Samson, and give my vanity the punishment it deserves. You had me in deep doubt."

"About what?"

"About—well, about us. I wasn't quite sure that I wanted Sally to have you—that I didn't need you myself. I've been a shameful little cat to Wilfred."

"But now—?" The Kentuckian broke off.

"Now, I know that my friendship for you and my love for him have both had their acid test—and I am happier than I've ever been before. I'm glad we've been through it. There are no doubts ahead. I've got you both."

"About him," said Samson, thoughtfully. "May I tell you something which, although it's a thing in your own heart, you have never quite known?"

She nodded, and he went on.

"The thing which you call fascination in me was really just a proxy, Drennie. You were liking qualities in me that were really his qualities. Just because you had known him only in gentle guise, his finish blinded you to his courage. Because he could turn 'to woman the heart of a woman,' you failed to see that under it was the 'iron and fire.' You thought you saw those qualities in me, because I wore my bark as shaggy as that scaling hickory over there. When he was getting anonymous threats of death every morning, he didn't mention them to you. He talked of teas and dances. I know his danger was real, because they tried to have me kill him—and if I'd been the man they took me for, I reckon I'd have done it. I was mad to my marrow that night—for a minute. I don't hold a brief for Wilfred, but I know that you liked me first for qualities which he has as strongly as I—and more strongly. He's a braver man than I, because, though raised to gentle things, when you ordered him into the fight, he was there. He never turned back, or flickered. I was raised on raw meat and gunpowder, but he went in without training."

The girl's eyes grew grave and thoughtful, and for the rest of the way she rode in silence.

There were transformations, too, in the house of

Spicer South. Windows had been cut, and lamps adopted. It was no longer so crudely a pioneer abode. While they waited for dinner, a girl lightly crossed the stile, and came up to the house. Adrienne met her at the door, while Samson and Horton stood back, waiting. Suddenly, Miss Lescott halted and regarded the newcomer in surprise. It was the same girl she had seen, yet a different girl. Her hair no longer fell in tangled masses. Her feet were no longer bare. Her dress, though simple, was charming, and, when she spoke, her English had dropped its half-illiterate peculiarities, though the voice still held its bird-like melody.

"Oh, Samson," cried Adrienne, "you two have been deceiving me! Sally, you were making up, dressing the part back there, and letting me patronize you."

Sally's laughter broke from her throat in a musical peal, but it still held the note of shyness, and it was Samson who spoke.

"I made the others ride on, and I got Sally to meet you just as she was when I left her to go East." He spoke with a touch of the mountaineer's over-sensitive pride. "I wanted you first to see my people, not as they are going to be, but as they were. I wanted you to know how proud I am of them—just that way."

That evening, the four of them walked together over to the cabin of the Widow Miller. At the stile, Adrienne Lescott turned to the girl, and said:

"I suppose this place is preëmpted. I'm going to take Wilfred down there by the creek, and leave you two alone."

Sally protested with mountain hospitality, but even under the moon she once more colored adorably.

Adrienne turned up the collar of her sweater around her throat, and, when she and the man who had waited, stood leaning on the rail of the footbridge, she laid a hand on his arm.

"Has the water flowed by my mill, Wilfred?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" His voice trembled.

"Will you have anything to ask me when Christmas comes?"

"If I can wait that long, Drennie," he told her.

"Don't wait, dear," she suddenly exclaimed, turning toward him, and raising eyes that held his answer. "Ask me now!"

But the question which he asked was one that his lips smothered as he pressed them against her own.

Back where the poplar threw its sooty shadow on the road, two figures sat close together on the top of a stile, talking happily in whispers. A girl raised her face, and the moon shone on the deepness of her eyes, as her lips curved in a trembling smile.

"You've come back, Samson," she said in a low voice, "but, if I'd known how lovely she was, I'd have given up hoping. I don't see what made you come."

Her voice dropped again into the tender cadence of dialect.

"I couldn't live withouten ye, Samson. I jest couldn't do hit." Would he remember when she had said that before?

"I reckon, Sally," he promptly told her, "I couldn't live withouten *you*, neither." Then, he added, fervently, "I'm plumb dead shore I couldn't."

THE END

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